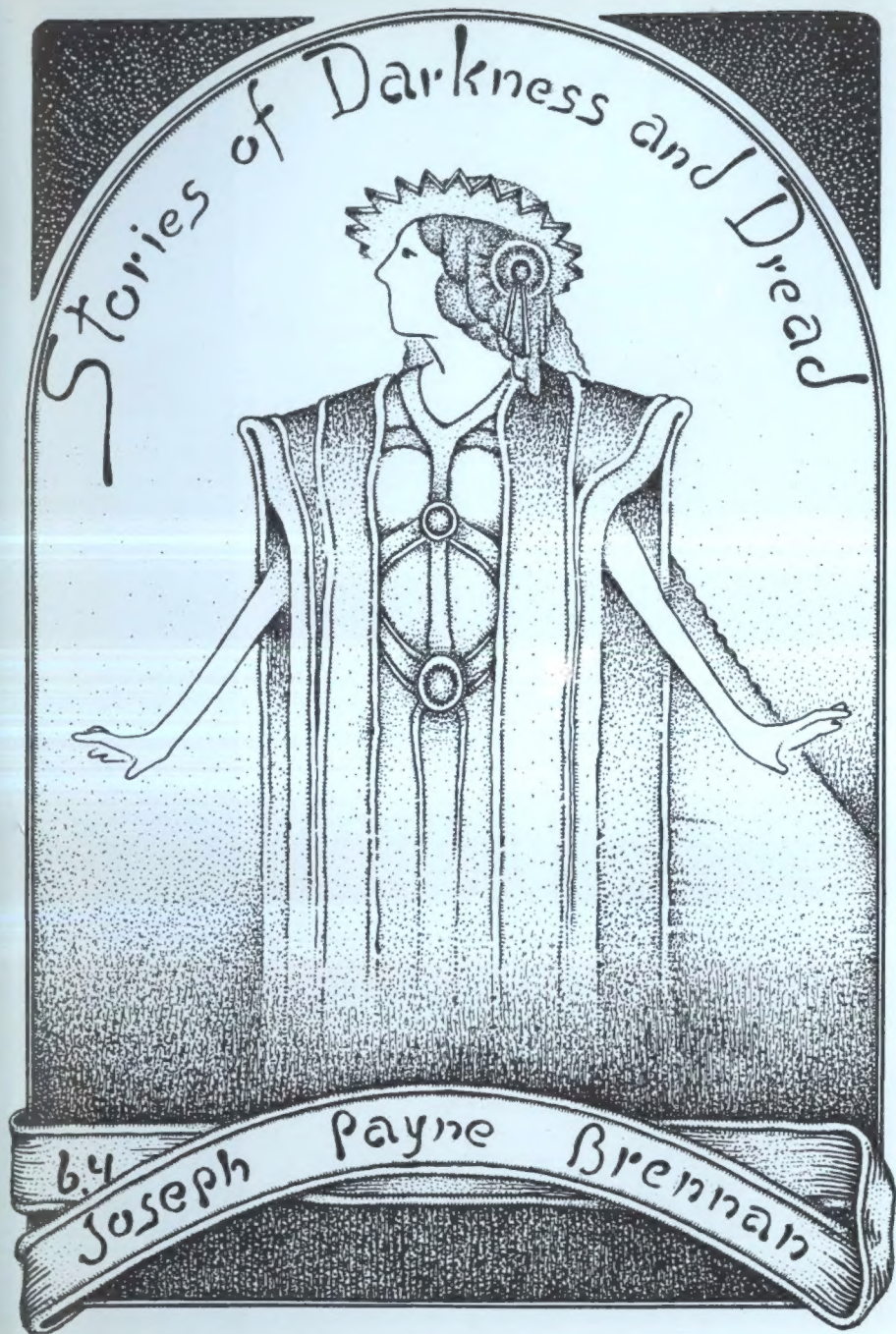


Stories
of
Darkness
and
Dread
By
Joseph
Payne
Brennan
Arkham
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\$6.00

STORIES OF DARKNESS AND DREAD

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

In the archives of imaginative fiction Joseph Payne Brennan made a permanent niche for himself with his first book, *Nine Horrors*. Never a prolific author, he wrought his tales with careful craftsmanship and economy of prose style.

Stories of Darkness and Dread presents a fine selection of 18 titles written since his previous volume. Some are only a few pages in length, all that is needed for the chilling shock of *Delivery on Erdmore Street*, and *Apprehension*, and *Black Thing at Midnight*. Others develop a sustained power for the supernatural force of *City of the Seven Winds* and *The Keeper of the Dust*. And while most of his work involves unearthly encounters, *The Dump* offers a nightmarish science-fiction view of the future calculated to make all readers content to be living today.

His method is civilized, his treatment literate. He often uses the milieu of his native Connecticut, the cities, the countryside, the seacoast as settings for the macabre or the terrifying, with sympathy and insight into the humblest of his characters who become caught in demonic stresses.

* * *

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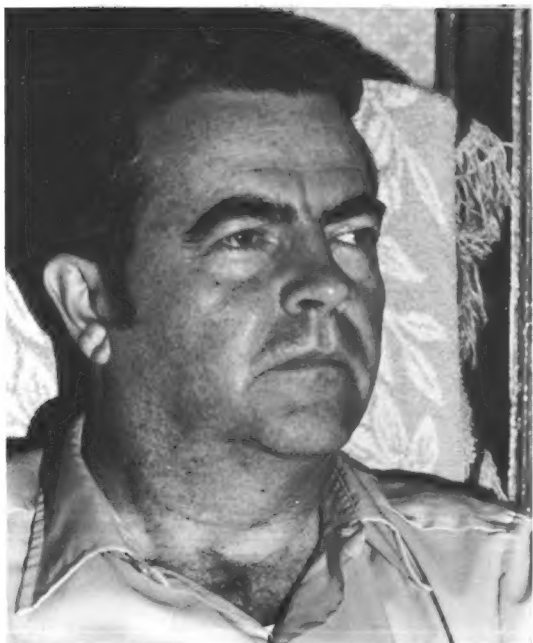
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Born in 1918 in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Joseph Payne Brennan is married and now lives in New Haven where he works at the Yale Library. He has been on the staff of *Theatre News*, and the editor of the poetry magazine *Essence* as well as *Macabre*, a magazine devoted to both prose and poetry of the weird.

His own fiction and poems have been published in a wide variety of magazines including *The American Scholar*, *The New York Times*, *Voices*, *Weird Tales*, *The Readers Digest*, *Coronet*, *Esquire*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Variegation*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, and many more.

He is the author of two books of poems, *Heart of Earth* and *The Humming Stair*. Among the brochures he has written are *H. P. Lovecraft: A Bibliography*, *20,000 Feet Over History*, and *H. P. Lovecraft: An Evaluation*.

He admits to a nostalgic fondness for antiquarian sections of old Connecticut towns and cities. Like a growing number of his contemporaries he objects to the replacement of beautiful landmarks and historical sites by wastelands of concrete and the egg-crate cubicles of apartment living. His writing often mirrors his acute time-sense.

Brennan

STORIES OF DARKNESS AND DREAD

Arkham
House

*Stories
of Darkness
and Dread*

JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

*Stories
of Darkness
and Dread*



ARKHAM HOUSE

SAUK CITY
1973

WISCONSIN

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*To my wife, Doris,
who helped in a hundred ways.*

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*Stories
of Darkness
and Dread*

City of the Seven Winds

DON'T ask me to be exact as to time and place. I was quite often drunk in those days and I always was vague as to points of the compass. I know it was a few years after World War II and that I had been traveling most of the day through a desert area somewhere near Syria. Actually, we may have crossed the border. I'm not sure.

Anyway, my guide quit as early evening approached. Just sat there in the sand, muttering, and refused to go a step further. Goluk, the camel-tender, couldn't seem to make up his mind whether to throw in his lot with the guide or to continue with me. I argued and swore and finally struck out alone on my own camel. I was determined not to spend the night in the desert. I had seen lights ahead and vowed to reach them by nightfall. I told those two sand rats I'd meet them the next day and off I went.

As I pushed on, the wind increased in strength. Soon it was howling past like some kind of Arabian banshee—if there is such a thing. It howled and moaned and sobbed and never stopped. And the closer I got to the lights up ahead, the worse it became. There was one odd thing, though. In spite of the wind, there was very little sand flying about. I couldn't understand that.

I was just beginning to congratulate myself—the lights ahead

loomed close now—when the camel quit. It suddenly hunkered down in the sand and refused to get up. I cursed and kicked and coaxed but it wouldn't move. Just squatted there like the ugly heathen beast that it was and wouldn't budge.

Swearing, I removed my pack, slung it across my shoulders and pushed on. I was absolutely determined to spend the night in the town up ahead.

I slogged on while that rampaging wind tore at me as if I were a rag doll. I slued around in the sand and nearly fell flat several times but I kept on going.

I had the weird feeling that the lights were advancing to meet me and there, unexpectedly, was the town.

I've never seen such a place, before or since—crooked stone houses with sloping tile roofs leaning crazily over narrow streets about half of which consisted of steps, outlandishly carved gables, queer little lattice windows set with sparkling discs of colored glass, and squat, square-cut chimney pots which looked like obsidian. It all reminded me of the cover illustration on a book of fairy tales which I had treasured at the age of five or thereabouts.

And I had the insane notion that the damnable wind originated somewhere in that strange town. Anyway, it reigned supreme. It absolutely scoured the angular streets, shook the glittering window lattices and wailed around the shining black chimney pots. It was up and down and in and out and it never stopped. It was as if the whole town had been dropped into a pool of the winds.

At first I didn't see a soul; finally as my eyes adjusted somewhat, I noticed several dim figures hurrying around corners, or up and down the ever-present steps. I walked on slowly, frowning, hunched up against the wind, but nobody paid any atten-

tion to me. I couldn't hear a scrap of sound except the scuffle and dirge of the wind.

I wanted to ask someone where I might find an inn, or whatever they called lodgings in that place, but I couldn't seem to get close enough to anyone to speak. I tried once, as a shadowy figure glided nearby, but my voice was snatched away by the wind.

I had wandered along, up and down steps, for seven blocks or so, when I saw lights shining through the thick, violet-tinted glass of a small window. Outside, over the door, an indecipherable sign creaked as it swung in the wind. I decided to take a chance.

Lifting the latch, I shoved open a massive door and stepped inside. As the door shut behind me, I was plunged into what seemed like absolute silence and darkness. Groping ahead, I ran into a curtain and pushed it aside. I blinked in the sudden light.

I appeared to be standing in an antiquated low-roofed tap room of some sort. Several old men in conical hats sat at small oval tables, sipping drinks. What I would call the bar was situated in the center of the room, sunk well below the general floor level. Five or six steps led down to it. It was nothing but a big square table with a circular opening in the center for the server of drinks. He sat on a stool surrounded by green, blue and black bottles, and a few small silver cups.

The old men looked up as I entered; the bartender didn't stir. As I approached the bar table and started down the steps, I saw that he was slumped on his stool, fast asleep.

The clink of a gold piece woke him up quickly enough. I took one of the green bottles and a silver cup and made my way to a table.

I'm not sure to this day what I drank, but a sip out of the silver cup and I felt like a new man. The liquor was fiery but

smooth, if you know what I mean. It didn't jolt; instead, it set up a warm glow which accelerated and fed on itself.

I'd got halfway through the bottle when one of the old men who had been sitting alone arose and came over. He tapped me on the shoulder and nodded questioningly toward the empty chair opposite my own.

I welcomed him effusively enough and offered him a drink out of my green bottle. He accepted with alacrity, having brought his own silver cup.

As he sat quaffing, I was reminded of a gnome, or a dwarf, out of legend. He appeared to be withered and shrunken with extreme old age, but his eyes were more alive than any I'd ever seen. An off shade of green, they simply danced. I felt that he could look right into my cranium and read every thought.

In no time at all we were engaged in an abstruse philosophical discussion. I couldn't repeat it now, if my life depended on it, but I was carried away with it at the time.

My drinking companion—who, incidentally, never actually introduced himself—seemed to carry an encyclopaedia in that brown wrinkled head of his. His conversation was fascinating; the only thing that occasionally puzzled and annoyed me was his confusion—actual or feigned—regarding the flow of Time. He spoke as if Atlantis had gone under the sea the previous year, as if Carthage had fallen a few months before, as if Attila and his sub-human hordes had thundered past only yesterday.

When the green bottle was empty, I ordered another, and then another. My elfish companion matched me drink for drink and seemed none the worse for it. I knew perfectly well that I was drinking far too much, but I didn't care.

The hours flew. Our conversation roved time and space. I listened, enthralled, as the little man in the conical hat talked on.

He spoke as if he were an eye-witness to events which had occurred a thousand years ago.

Finally a gong sounded, the violet lights dimmed and my companion arose. He bowed.

"Permit me, sir, to conduct you to my modest abode. It is at least shelter against the night."

I stood up, reeling. "Thanks," I replied, "but I thought this was an inn."

He smiled enigmatically. "By no means, sir. The chambers above have regular occupants. This man dispenses usquebaugh only."

As I left with my diminutive companion, I felt that the eyes of the others followed us out.

Once outside, the wind seized us. If I had thought it wild before, it was frenzied now. It boomed and blasted through those narrow alleys like the start of a desert hurricane. I feared that I would be swept off my feet, but my little friend bounded ahead of me, up and down steps, as nimble as a mountain goat. Conversation, of course, was not possible. I followed him wordlessly.

Presently he seemed to disappear into a wall which ran along one side of the twisting street. As I grew close, I saw that he had slipped into an aperture so small that I had to enter sideways. A few yards down he held open a wattle-work door. I followed him inside and he dropped a huge wooden bolt.

The relatively frail door and the big wooden bolt puzzled me. I suppose I smiled at the incongruity.

He sensed my thoughts. "The bolt is only to keep it closed, my friend. We do not fear what may enter *here!*"

I shrugged and followed him up stone steps which soon began to seem endless. They twisted and coiled and circled back

upon themselves. The adjacent walls were solid stone; once or twice we passed a flaring faggot torch held by a wall bracket.

I was thoroughly winded when the stairs ended and my host led me down a dark stone corridor.

He opened another door—a thick timbered one reinforced with protruding iron rivets—and bowed me inside.

The room was like the laboratory of a medieval alchemist or the den of a wizard. Rows of incunabula lined the shelves; tables were strewn with ancient maps, compasses, vials of colored liquids, beakers and retorts, small carved stone figures, rolls of yellowed parchment and some other items for which I did not even have a name. From a niche cut in the top of an alcove a human skull grinned down at me.

Shutting the door, my friend waved me to a bench, disappeared into the curtained-off alcove and presently reappeared bearing a dark-colored squarish bottle and two silver mugs.

He poured an amber-colored liquid into the mugs. "A final drop to insure a good night's sleep, my friend!" He held out one of the mugs.

Just as I accepted it, a sound from somewhere outside made him turn his head. In that instant I dashed the contents of the mug onto the stone floor behind the bench.

But when he turned back, I lifted the mug in a mock toast, brought it to my lips and made as if to drink.

He lifted his own mug, but I got the impression that he barely sipped the contents.

He nodded, looking at me owlishly. "We have had a fine conversation. You have a keen interest in all things seen and unseen! I have told you much, but I have scarcely touched the surface. Come, my friend, follow me! A last gesture of hospitality before you fall asleep!"

Setting down his mug, he started toward a distant corner of the room. Mystified, I followed.

A great door, thicker even than the other, and strengthened with iron hoops, lay hidden in shadows in one corner. He swung it open to reveal a short flight of steps leading upward. The chamber thus disclosed was small and circular. I immediately understood that his laboratory was on the top of the building and that this small room was a sort of turret extending above one corner of the roof.

In the large outer room I had heard nothing, but here in the turret the mad moaning of the wind again became audible. I looked up, seeing nothing but a faint glimmer of light:

My dwarf host urged me up the steps. "Give your eyes time to adjust to the changed light," he instructed me. "You will then see much!"

A sizable square of curved glass was set into one wall of the turret. It looked smoky at first and I could see nothing, but gradually it began to clear and then I imagined that I saw shadows moving against the outside of the glass.

Shadows! If only they had remained shadows! But the glass cleared quickly enough and then there was revealed to me a glimpse into such a hell as I never hope to see again.

Seemingly suspended in the outside air, floating, writhing and squirming, was a vast host. There are no words in the limited language in which I write to encompass them. I think of human abortions which have somehow been imbued with hideous half-liquid life, of monstrous elementals from some infinitely distant end of the universe, of the half-conceived hallucinations of some unspeakable god of savagery and chaos, brought to being in a devil's broth which boiled and seethed outside there in the night, borne up by the wings of that wailing wind.

They were the foul, demon host of outer darkness, mercifully shut off from ordinary human sight.

They gibbered and gaped, rolling with the waves of wind, their dead-white eyes pressed close against the glass. I thought of corpses, long dead, lashed and flung in the troughs of an angry sea. Mouths ugly and grey as the belly of a moccasin mewed and moped. Slimy stumps which appeared to be some kind of appendages poked at the glass. At one point a mottled horror which seemed to be devouring its own viscera loomed and was gone.

Sick, shaken with horror and abhorrence, I tried to turn away from the glass; yet I stared on, motionless, like a forest bird frozen into immobility by the swaying head of a serpent.

A sly chuckling sounded behind me. My diminutive friend spoke up. "You are fascinated, sir. And justifiably. Few outside this city have seen what you see now—and I can assure you none have lived to describe the spectacle."

His dry laughter grated out again. "But now it is my duty to inform you that within seconds you will be completely helpless. You will be entirely unable to move—you recall our little toast, eh?—but you will retain all your senses—sight, hearing, etc. I shall leave you alone in the tower room, but do not despair, my good friend. Very shortly you will have visitors. The window will slide back. You will be positively overwhelmed! The children of the wind will make sport with you. It may be their playful way to pluck out all your hairs and pull off a bit of flesh before they finish. They will bear you away on the wind, my friend. Perhaps a few red bones may be scattered on the sands some hours hence."

He paused and his voice took on a note of mock apology. "You understand the justice of all this? You have been permit-

ted to enter our city and you have been well entertained. You must pay the price. In any case you should consider it an honor to be given over to the children of the wind. Unless they are furnished with an occasional offering, they become restless. It is our policy to keep them above the roofs. You can imagine the confusion if they descended to our very streets. Farewell, dear friend."

Throughout all this monologue, I remained perfectly still, scarcely breathing. But the instant I heard my treacherous host move toward the turret door, I leaped into life.

Whirling around, I sprang down the steps, landing squarely on top of him. He fell heavily, taken completely by surprise, but in the next instant he was fighting back like a cornered badger. He bit and clawed and kicked, but I knew the strength of near madness. A kind of berserk fury overwhelmed me. I pounded that gnome-like face until it was pulp, until I thought his skull would split against the stone steps.

I wasted no time, however, once he stopped struggling. After a final upward glance at that ghastly window into hell, I hurried from the turret room, slammed the thick door and dropped a huge outside bolt.

As I leaned there, panting, I noticed a sort of lever protruding from the wall adjacent to the door. I understood at once that it permitted the turret window to be withdrawn or closed. As the lever was moved one way or the other, the curved window probably slid in and out of a grooved recess cut into the turret wall.

As I contemplated it, I detected a scrabbling, scratching noise within the turret. Evidently, in spite of the hammering I had given him, my lethal host was reviving. Judging by the sound, he was fumbling with the door.

Instantly I was beset by fresh fears—fears that he might somehow open the door and confront me with a new kind of horror which my flesh-and-blood fists could not subdue, fears, also, that he might summon aid.

I acted on impulse, without giving myself time to think about possible consequences. Rushing to the wall, I pulled the lever back as far as it would go.

For a moment there was absolute silence; then I heard a subdued roaring sound. Immediately afterward a cry broke forth which stirred the hairs on my head. It reminded me of the despairing, high-pitched, prolonged squeal of a great rat hopelessly pinned in the jaws of a steel trap. It went on and on, an agonized indescribable shriek of utter anguish.

And then I heard the other sounds, snufflings, fumblings, titters, floppings, mewings—all intermingled with the rising roar of the wind.

The squealing quickly mounted in crescendo; it became so shrill, so piercing, that I imagined it could be heard miles away.

Abruptly it grew fainter. It seemed, first, to come from just outside the turret window; then it retreated into the night, until gradually it was lost in the ever-present skirl and howl of the wind.

Had that wild shriek of despair been heard throughout the town? As the thought occurred to me, I dashed from the room, down the dark corridor to the twisting stairs. In spite of their convolutions, I almost flew. Flinging up the bolt on the wattle-work door, I hurled myself into the night and ran for my life. I ran as I had never run before, nor have since. Up and down the accursed alley steps, down long streets of utter darkness where the walls were only feet apart, across dim, deserted cobblestone

courts which seemed to have existed since the beginning of recorded time.

More than once I sprawled headlong, but I was up in an instant and running again. I was sure that a pursuit was in progress and that my only chance was to reach the outskirts of the town and race away over the desert sands.

When the buildings finally thinned out, my breath was coming in great broken sobs and my legs trembled. Yet I pushed on until I felt the sands underfoot and glimpsed stars overhead. Even then I did not stop. I ran on and on until darkness spun about me and my legs buckled.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was coming up. Goluk, the camel-tender, squatted nearby.

When I related my adventures of the night, he stared at me as if I were a corpse come back to life. Finally, making a sign to ward off demons he shook his head.

"You have escaped alive from the city of the seven winds!" he exclaimed. "Honored sir, you are one in ten thousand."

I looked around. On every side, stretching to the distant horizon, there was nothing but level sand dunes. "But Goluk, I could not have run this far. Did you carry me here on your camel?"

"I found you where you now lie."

It was my turn to stare at him. "Where, then, is this city you mention, this city of seven winds?"

He waved vaguely toward the horizon. "Out there—somewhere. They can make it invisible if they wish. It has been there since time began!"

"And who are 'they', Goluk?"

He looked at me as if he pitied my ignorance. "The sorcerers,

honored sir. They have held the city of the seven winds for as long as the sands have drifted. Sometimes it is known as the city of the sorcerers."

"Which are the seven winds? I know only of four."

Goluk got up. "The four winds of earth and the three winds of hell!" He walked toward his camel and would say no more.

He brought me to the first border town and left hurriedly. It was evident that he had no further desire to travel in my company.

There the matter rests. A grizzled old trader I met in a Tunis bazaar later intimated that the City of the Seven Winds existed on another level of the time continuum. But no one really wanted to talk about the place.

Some of my friends say the whole business was a nightmare brought on by too much drink.

Goluk, the camel-tender, thought otherwise.

The Keeper of the Dust

BENJAMIN JALMISS, the noted archaeologist, turned the latchkey and entered his London house with a feeling of vast relief. This last expedition had been too strenuous for him; he had not felt well since leaving Cairo.

Sighing heavily, he set down his bags and glanced around the rooms. The place seemed incredibly dusty. A thick film of dust coated the floors; cobwebs fuzzy with dust festooned the ceiling corners; the windows were nearly opaque with clinging dust.

He grimaced in distaste, closing the door behind him. Then he noticed something else. A faint, musty fetor pervaded the house, an oppressive odor, dry, stale and offensive. It was not merely the smell of the dust which his entry had displaced. It assailed his nostrils as if it seeped from the very walls. And although it was a mephitic odor not often encountered, there was nevertheless a disturbing familiarity about it.

Jalmiss stood a moment frowning with repugnance, wondering where he had been exposed to it in the past. He shrugged finally, crossed to the windows and opened them wide.

By evening the fetor had disappeared, or nearly so. He closed the windows, and after a refreshing toilet and a light repast, proceeded to the study.

But here again he was troubled by the dust. It had collected in

the study in enormous amounts. It lay like sheets of fine wrinkled sand upon the chair seats; it lay heaped in the corners in veritable mounds; it entirely covered the tables.

Making a mental note to call the cleaning woman in the morning, Jalmiss settled into his old chair and prepared to relax. He felt exhausted. He had lost flesh on the return trip; he had not eaten and he had not slept very well. There had been remarks about his lack of color, his loss of weight. But of course he would soon be his old self again. He needed rest and some good London air in his lungs, fog and all. That would set him right again.

Now that he was safe away from the disquieting atmosphere evoked by Egyptian sun, sand and superstition, he was ready to admit that the scarab *had* bothered him a bit. But of course it was sheer nonsense. He had spent twenty years of his life prodding and poking into Egyptian tombs and nothing had ever troubled him before. He didn't believe the wild tales you heard every few years about the fearful fate befalling tomb looters. Mummies were mummies and no more than that. All this melodramatic hearsay about mummies' curses and malignant invisible guardians of the crypts was so much unadulterated poppycock.

The scarab, for instance. He had plucked it from the crumbling breast of a mummy where it had been placed untold centuries before when the heart of the newly dead had been removed. Actually, of course, ethics prescribed that he turn it over to the expedition. But it was a small thing and he had acted on impulse and pocketed it. It would, he had decided, make an attractive minor souvenir.

He removed it from his coat now and examined it again. It was of glazed green jasper, about an inch in diameter, formed in the likeness of a sacred Egyptian beetle. Its back was covered

with tiny hieroglyphics and on its under shell was carved the legended likeness of a reputed guardian of the tomb.

He took out his magnifying glass and reread the warning contained in the almost microscopic hieroglyphics: "And if any enter unbidden, his blood shall freeze up; he shall wither, and unto him at the last cometh Ka-Rath, Keeper of the Dust."

What nonsense! Just the sort of thing the more vulgar papers would play up! And then that really hideous image traced on the under shell. Only a diseased imagination could have conjured that up. It was too overdone to be convincing: the twisted repulsive body of an infant abortion topped by the wrinkled decrepit head of a malignant old man!

So that was Ka-Rath, Keeper of the Dust! Humph! At least Osiris and Set, Sebek and Bast and the other Egyptian gods were the subjects of definite and well-established myths. But who had ever heard of Ka-Rath? Further proof that he had sprung directly from the distorted imagination of some ancient temple charlatan!

He placed the scarab on an adjacent table and rose to find a favorite book. But as he gained his feet he was assailed by a sudden spell of weakness. He actually tottered for a moment; the strength seemed to drain out of his legs. He caught the chair arm and quickly sat down.

He was alarmed; for a moment a kind of panic seized him. But then he began to reason with himself. His weakness was, he assured himself, merely the result of a fatiguing journey. After all, he *was* getting along in years. His reserves of strength had apparently been tapped to a far greater extent than he had realized.

As he sat reassuring himself, he became aware again of the inordinate amounts of dust in the room. It was ridiculous of

course—but he could almost imagine that it had *grown thicker* during the course of the evening.

Also, that repellent musty odor was beginning to return, much stronger than before.

And suddenly Jalmiss knew where he had previously encountered it. It was the same as that which burst forth into the underground chambers beneath the desert sands when the sarcophagi of ancient Egypt were forced apart! It was the feter which rose when the mummy shrouds were shorn away!

There could be no mistaking it. He sat overcome with a bottomless dread. Staring toward the table, he saw that the scarab was clear of dust. It appeared to shimmer and gleam with a kind of inner glow which was not caused by the lamplight. The dust floated above it and covered the table on all sides and yet its surface remained clear and bright.

Jalmiss gripped the chair arms with all his remaining strength. There was now only one thought in his mind. He must escape from the room, from the house itself, without further delay. The place was accursed; it was snapping his strength, eating away at his last remaining energies. And it was not merely that a monstrous enervation had taken hold of him. His senses appeared to be failing. A film seemed to blur his vision; there was a humming in his ears; his extremities had become half numb.

With a terrific effort he managed to rise. Making a fierce and concentrated mental resolve, he turned his feet to the door and began shuffling feebly toward it.

He shambled along slowly, breathing with conscious effort. Gaining the doorway, he paused briefly to rest. But a wild terror was upon him and he dared not tarry long.

The rooms were flooded with dust. It burned and stung his nostrils with its acrid, musty foulness. It filtered onto his clothes

and against his face; it swirled against the lights until they appeared to glow through a translucent mist.

The fetor of unspeakable decay reeked in every corner. It was as if he crept through a burial vault sunken deep in the earth.

He entered the outer hallway and made for the door. Beyond was clear air, lights, London, escape.

He reached the door, opened it—and emitted a terrified shriek. As the cold air rushed in, blackness fell before his eyes; the humming in his ears became a roar; his heart fluttered, skipped, almost stopped.

With his last bit of strength he closed the door. He leaned against it, stricken with a weakness which was like the shadow of approaching death. His entire body was turning numb; there was no feeling at all in his legs, only a faint prickling sensation left in his arms. The strangling fumes which swirled with the dust clutched at his throat with growing effect.

By sheer force of will he began a torturous return down the hall. There might yet be one escape. If he could regain the study and somehow eject the cursed scarab from the house, deliverance might be achieved.

He reached the end of the hall, peered down cautiously at his numb feet in order to navigate the narrow turn—and a moment later screamed in pure insane terror.

Outlined in the dust were two misshapen tiny footprints.

He sank to his knees, seized with unutterable horror, and as he raised his eyes toward the table where the scarab lay, the dust swirling above it seemed to thicken. It grew darker, eddying into a little whirlpool, and then the faint outlines of a form grew visible.

The dust appeared to congeal, the outline became sharper, and finally there grew manifest a hideous shape, a ghastly trav-

esty of creation, which combined the repulsive body of an infant abortion with the wrinkled head of a malignant old man.

Jalmiss saw it and shrieked in accents of boundless, indescribable terror.

“Ka-Rath! O Great One! Mercy! Mercy!”

In utter abject dread, he began frantically pouring forth phrases in the language of ancient Egypt.

If the Keeper of the Dust heard, it did not heed. Soundlessly it glided forward.

Zombique

YOU may have heard of the Tyler Marinsons. He'd made a fortune on "the street" before he was thirty. Finally he tired of the stock market shuffle, bought a superb country house, with fifty acres, in Barsted, Connecticut, closed his New York office and began leading the life of a country gentleman.

He still had investments, of course, and he watched them closely, but his market maneuvers became little more than a hobby. If all of his remaining stock investments had been wiped out, it wouldn't have mattered much. He had enough real estate, municipal bonds, notes, trust funds, cash and personal property to survive almost anything except revolution or a nuclear attack.

He stayed on several boards of directors to "keep a hand in," as he expressed it.

His wife, Maria, was delighted with her new life. She'd hated New York and she loved the country. For nearly a year the Marinsons lived almost like recluses. They seldom entertained; they went to New York only twice in ten months.

At length, however, Maria felt that her husband was getting restless. She began having house parties and frequent week-end guests. Tyler, off the tightrope of tension which he had walked in New York, slipped easily into the new scheme of things. The

Marinson house parties became "musts" and Tyler himself turned into something of a raconteur.

They were a handsome couple, mid-thirties and childless but not a bit maladjusted. Tyler, tall and dark with fine chiselled features; Maria, small and blonde with the kind of arresting blue eyes that look unreal.

They met Kemley through the Paulmanns. Kemley had made it in oils. He spent most of his time poking around the Caribbean. He became the Marinsons' "pet." He was a bachelor nearing fifty and Maria, with a persistence which amused him, kept steering various women friends—widows mostly—in his direction. It became a standing joke between them. Kemley adored her and respected Tyler. He never returned from one of his jaunts without bringing back some souvenir for the two of them.

It wasn't easy. You don't buy typical tourist baubles for people like the Marinsons. Kemley concentrated on curios which, while not always expensive, were hard to get. Tyler appreciated them and Maria always received them with the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a child.

It was one of Kemley's curio gifts which precipitated the business. Or maybe it was all coincidence. You'll have to judge for yourself.

Shortly after a trip to Haiti, Kemley brought the Marinsons a Haitian "voodoo" doll. About four inches high, it was carved out of hard native wood, tufted with feathers and mounted on a thick wooden base. Branching from each side of it were narrow metal rods ending in carved wooden cylinders which resembled drums. The figure was so attached to the base that when you gave one of the rods or drums a push, the doll would execute a

grotesque dance atop the base, twirling, bobbing and swaying as if suddenly animated with a life of its own.

Kemley told the Marinsons that if you wanted to bring bad luck to an enemy, someone you hated, you twirled the doll, spoke its name—*Zombie*—and told it what you wanted.

Tyler was fascinated by it but, for once, Maria's enthusiasm seemed forced. After Kemley had left, she admitted to her husband that she didn't like the figure. She confessed, in fact, that she was afraid of it.

Tyler joshed her about it, twirled the doll, spoke its name and asked that old Harrington's steel stocks drop twenty points.

The next day Harrington's steel stocks moved up two points. Tyler duly brought this to Maria's attention.

She frowned. "You didn't actually fulfill the conditions," she pointed out. "Harrington was never your enemy; you were just rivals. You never *hated* him. And you didn't *really* want his steel to drop twenty points."

Tyler laughed. "Maybe you're right at that. Anyhow it's all a bag of nonsense."

The Haitian doll remained on the mantel and Maria gradually forgot about it.

And then Tyler had a furious row with Jake Seff, owner of the local Atlas Garage. What it amounted to, in brief, was that the Atlas had done a shoddy repair job on Tyler's favorite sports car and then had grossly overcharged him for the inferior work. Jake Seff stubbornly refused to do the work over and just as stubbornly refused to reduce his bill.

Tyler came home swearing like a whole platoon of troopers. Maria tried to placate him, but he sulked and brooded the entire evening.

"But darling," she pleaded as they prepared for bed, "it's only a few hundred dollars!"

Tyler scowled. "That's not the point. I don't like being made a fool of because I have money. I accumulated that money by my wits and it wasn't easy. I took some pretty risks. Seff thinks he can clip me and get away with it. Thinks I'll just shrug it off. Well—I won't!"

The next day he made telephone calls during the morning and left after lunch. He returned in time for cocktails, still furious but more self-contained than on the previous day.

Over drinks he told Maria that he had checked into the financial status of the Atlas Garage. Jake Seff, he revealed, was nearing the brink of bankruptcy. He was so desperate for cash he had even allowed his insurance on the garage to lapse.

Tyler refilled his glass. "He's not only unscrupulous—he's plain stupid. That insurance should get priority over everything. He wouldn't get a dime if the garage burned down; he'd be finished."

Maria tried to change the subject, but Tyler wasn't listening. He paced around the room. By chance he stopped near the mantel, feet away from Kemley's Haitian voodoo doll.

He set down his glass. "By God, I'm going to try it!"

Maria came over. "Tyler! That's childish!"

He ignored her. Flicking a finger against one of the drums, he triggered the feathered doll into its twirling, bobbing dance.

"Zombique!" he commanded, "burn down Jackie Seff's Atlas Garage!"

Maria sighed and sat down. "Tyler, I don't *like* this. You shouldn't hate anyone like that. Let's get rid of that horrid thing!"

Tyler picked up his glass. "What? Get rid of it? Old Kemley

would never forgive us. He looks to see if it's still on the mantelpiece every time he comes."

The next morning when Maria came down to breakfast, Tyler was already reading an area newspaper as he sipped his orange juice.

Pointing to a brief paragraph, he handed her the paper without a word.

She read the caption—*Seff's Garage Burns; Total Ruin*—and turned white.

"Tyler! You didn't—?"

"What? Set fire to Seff's junkyard garage? Don't be a silly goose! And that doll had nothing to do with it either. It's all just a crazy coincidence."

Ignoring her orange juice, Maria poured a cup of coffee. She sipped it black. "Tyler, please take that voodoo thing out of the house and burn it—or throw it in the woods."

Tyler looked across at her. "You're talking like a ten-year-old. These things happen once in a while. Pity you can't see the humor in it. We could both have a good laugh."

Maria shook her head. "Somebody's bankruptcy is nothing to laugh about—even if he is dishonest. And now I'm *really* afraid of that nasty little puppet."

Tyler finished his coffee and stood up. "Well, I think I'll take a spin to the village. Need a few things from Carson's store."

Maria watched as he slipped on his coat. "You just want to drive past Seff's and look at the smoking ruins!" she commented, with a vehemence which surprised him.

He shrugged and went out the door.

The voodoo doll remained on the mantel shelf but it was weeks before Maria appeared to throw off her uneasiness concerning it. On several occasions Tyler almost yielded to an im-

pulse to destroy the doll, but each time, a certain implacable element in his nature, grounded, it seemed, in the very bedrock of his being, asserted itself. The Haitian doll stayed on the mantel.

And then Tyler got arrested by Sergeant Skepley. Maria was home, bedded down with the flu, and Tyler had to make one of his infrequent trips to New York. The directors' meeting was late; it was already dusk by the time he reached the parkway.

He traveled well over the limit all the way up to Hartford and nobody bothered him. He slowed down for the cutoff but by the time he reached the outskirts of Barsted he was way over the posted limit again. The roads in Barsted were narrow and winding. You were reasonably safe at thirty-five, but definitely not at fifty-five.

Tyler was fretting about Maria and inwardly cursing Templeton, whose long tedious spiel had held up the directors' meeting, when he saw the flashing red lights in his rear-view mirror.

Momentarily he pressed the accelerator a bit further toward the floor. He thought better of it, however, slowed up and finally braked to a stop.

The police car pulled up behind him, red signal lights still flashing. He had his license and registration cards ready by the time the sergeant came abreast of his own car window.

As the sergeant studied the documents, he studied the sergeant. Young. Officious-looking. Already a sergeant. No sense telling him he had a sick wife at home alone.

The sergeant pulled a printed form out of his pocket. "I'm placing charges, Mr. Marinson, for reckless driving, for exceeding the speed limit and for attempting to evade arrest."

Marinson felt the blood rush to his face. "Now wait a minute! Maybe I was over the limit, but you can't throw the whole book at me! What's this about evading?"

The sergeant's humorless eyes stared back at him. "When you first noticed my lights, Mr. Marinson, you hit your gas pedal. That's 'attempting to evade'."

He turned toward the patrol car. "I'll need about ten minutes to fill out this arrest form, Mr. Marinson."

Marinson sat waiting, flushed with rage. Twenty minutes passed before the sergeant returned with the completed form.

He started to explain something about Circuit Court in Meriden but Marinson snatched the form out of his hand, threw it on the car seat and turned the ignition key.

"It's on the form, isn't it?" he asked furiously. "I can read!"

When he got around the next curve in the road, he experienced an impulse to press the gas pedal down to the floor. He glanced in the rear-view mirror. The sergeant's prowling car was already coming around the curve.

When he reached home, he was trembling with fury. He drove into the garage and sat for a few minutes before going inside.

Maria said she felt better but she hadn't eaten and she still looked feverish. He wanted to call Doctor Clane again but she shook her head.

"I called him this afternoon. He said to go on with the medication, stay in bed and drink a lot of fluids. He said it runs its course and I'll be better in a few days."

Tyler sat with her for an hour before going down to get an improvised dinner snack. He had told her about the tedious directors' meeting but not about his arrest.

The kitchen looked uninviting. He decided he wasn't hungry and went into the living room. Pouring a stiff scotch and soda, he took out the arrest form.

The form indicated that he had to appear in Circuit Court in

Meriden on a specified date, unless he chose to plead not guilty. In that case, he had to so notify the court and he would be informed of a subsequent date for appearance.

The arresting officer was a Sergeant Skepley.

Swearing, he threw down the form. He was well known in the town. Any other member of the force, he told himself, would have given him a simple warning or, at worst, a summons which could be mailed in with a nominal fine. Skepley, he remembered, had a reputation for toughness. Recalling the sergeant's steady, somewhat bulging eyes and compressed lips, Marinson concluded that he was not merely tough but actually sadistic.

After another drink, he decided to fight the case. He'd call Boatner's law firm tomorrow morning. They had a branch in nearby Hartford. He knew young Millward who was in charge of it. Millward would get him off the hook if anybody could.

He felt better after the third drink. He poured a fourth, sprawling back in his chair with a sigh of relative contentment. As he glanced toward the mantel, he noticed the Haitian doll.

He set down his drink and crossed the room.

Flicking his forefinger against one of the wooden drums attached to the figure, he triggered the feathered doll into motion. Bobbing, nodding and swaying, it performed a macabre little dance.

"Zombique," he commanded, "make Sergeant Skepley drop dead!"

"Dead, dead, dead!" he repeated as the dance slowed and the puppet came to rest.

Returning to his chair, he decided to finish off the bottle of scotch.

He woke up with a nagging hangover the next morning. Maria was fretful and feverish and didn't want to eat.

He telephoned Boatner's law office in Hartford before ten o'clock. Millward hadn't arrived yet. He left no message but said he'd call back.

He tried again shortly before eleven. Millward had arrived but was in conference and couldn't be disturbed. Did he want to leave a message? Muttering, he hung up.

After pacing the floor for a few minutes, he went up to see Maria.

She was reading in bed and seemed somewhat better. He told her he had to talk to Millward but hadn't been able to reach him by telephone.

Maria laid down her book. "Tyler, you're so restless, you're making me nervous! Why don't you just drive into Hartford and see Millward?"

When he murmured something about leaving her alone, she scoffed. "The phone's next to my bed and anyway I'm better. You've been wound up tight ever since that directors' meeting. You don't need to fuss over me. Go and talk to Millward. Something's making you positively jumpy!"

Picking up her book, she waved a mock goodbye.

He kissed her and grinned. "If I were a doctor, you'd be my favorite patient! All right. I'll see you later then."

He drove to Hartford, taking his time down Farmington Avenue. When he arrived at Boatner's, Millward had already left for lunch. He went out for a cocktail and a sandwich and came back an hour later.

This time Millward was in. Tyler told his story, getting angry all over again.

Millward sat back, put his fingertips together and pushed up his glasses. Marinson observed that he was beginning to get paunchy.

Millward's smile held a tinge of deprecation. "Things aren't the way they used to be, Tyler. At least not here in Connecticut. To quash something like this is almost impossible. The best we can do is get some delays and stall for the right judge. With luck, you'll hang onto your license. This Skepley must have a reputation and you did have a sick wife at home. We'll see what we can do."

Marinson thanked him and stood up. He felt a keen sense of disappointment. A few years ago, in New York, Millward would have taken the ticket and torn it up in front of him. Then there'd be a slap on the back and a drink from Millward's private flask.

He started homeward in a thoughtful mood, vaguely troubled and apprehensive. His money and presence, he reflected, no longer seemed to matter as much as formerly.

He drove through the small center of Barsted, noticing that it appeared nearly deserted.

As he swung into Postgate Road, which led to his house, an ambulance pulled into view. It wasn't going very fast and the siren wasn't on. He stared into it as it passed. A figure lay in the back, covered with a blanket.

He stopped, hesitated and very nearly backed around to follow the ambulance. He changed his mind and drove on, feeling his stomach constrict. Postgate Road lay in a relatively isolated area. There were only two houses besides his own on the entire length of it.

Ten minutes later he topped the rise which led to his house and the bottom fell out of his world.

There was no house—only a smoking sprawl of blackened timbers, brick chimneys and collapsed pipes, sagging crazily in every direction.

He managed to stop the car.

As he sat transfixed, a man in a corduroy suit came over. It was someone he recognized but he couldn't recall who it was.

"Take it easy, Mr. Marinson. We did all we could. I'm sorry, awful sorry."

Staring around, Marinson saw the Barsted Volunteer Fire Company trucks, police cars and at least a dozen civilian cars. His lawn, he decided, would be a frightful mess.

Abruptly, he started the car. "I'm going after my wife," he said. "She was in that ambulance."

People were hovering around the car. A hand closed on his wrist.

Someone stood there, looking mournful, shaking his head.

"Your wife wasn't in the ambulance, Mr. Marinson."

He got out of the car, suddenly furious. "What *is* this? Of course it was my wife. What are you telling—?"

He stopped and stared toward the smoking ruins of his house. His eyes sought the others' eyes. Not a single pair of them would meet his own.

A sob shook him. He ran toward the twisted, blackened debris. "Maria!"

Someone put an arm around his shoulder. He looked up dully and turned away, then stopped, puzzled. "My wife's body . . . You say—Who was in the ambulance?"

A familiar voice replied. "That was Sergeant Skepley in the ambulance. He's dead. He came by here on patrol, far as we can figure out, saw the place on fire and ran to see if anyone was inside. He never made it. He dropped dead halfway between his

car and the house. Heart attack, we think. Massive. Shortly after, I guess, the Confords saw flames shooting over the trees and called the fire volunteers. They got here in record time but too late. Your wife must have been overcome with smoke. She never—got out."

Marinson stumbled toward the ruins. He stopped, staring.

The living room's brick chimney and its attached marble mantel were still standing.

Although its feathers had been burned off, the Haitian doll remained on the mantel shelf. The fine-grained wood from which it was carved had somehow survived the sudden inferno of flames.

A wind had risen, buffeting against the miniature drums fastened to the tiny figure.

Bobbing, swaying and bowing, it executed a bizarre little dance of death.

The Seventh Incantation

"OF THESE black prayers or incantations there be seven, three for ordinarie charmes and aides, and the like numbere for the unholie and compleat destruction of alle enemie. But of the seventh the curious in alle these partes are warned. Let not the last incantation be recited, unlesse ye desire the sight of moste awful deamon. Although it be said the deamon shews not unlesse the wordes be spake by the bloodie altar of the Olde Ones, yet it were well to beware. For it be knowne that the Saracene sorcerer, Mal Lazal, dide wantonlie chante the dire wordes and the deamon dide come—and not finding a bloodie offering did rage at the wizard and rende him exceedinglie. The life bloode of a childe or chaste maid be best, yet a beaste, a goode ox or sheep, is said sufficient. But beware lest the beaste be dead when the bloode be taken, for then shall the deamon's rage be dire. If the offering be well, the deamon shall give unholie power, so that the servant grow riche and reache above alle his neighbors."

For the third time, and with growing excitement, Emmet Telquist read the faded words. They were contained in a crumbling and curious and probably unique bound manuscript book which he had discovered quite by accident some days before while shuffling through the dust-laden packing crates which held his deceased uncle's library.

The book was entitled simply "True Magik," and the writer signed himself "Theophilis Wenn." Quite possibly the name was a pseudonym; certainly, judging by the contents, the rash author must have had reason to keep secret his real identity.

The book was a veritable encyclopedia of devils' lore. There was everywhere manifest a genuine and erudite scholarship which had been lavished on a vast variety of esoteric and forbidden subjects. There were detailed discussions on enchantments and possession, paragraphs on vampirism and ghoul legend, pages devoted to demonology, witch worship, and eldritch idols, notes on holocaust rites, unspeakable maculations and fearsome full-moon sacrifices to the powers of pristine darkness.

Evidently the writer had been a necromancer of note. The style in general was arbitrary and assured, betraying egoism and not a little arrogance. There was no faint note of humor. Theophilis Wenn—or whoever it was that disguised his true identity under that name—had written in dire earnest. Of that there could be no doubt.

Emmet Telquist, the village outcast, the bitter misanthropic issue of an infamous father and a mother who had died insane, regarded the book as a sudden treasure, a secret storehouse of knowledge and power which would enable him to compete with his more successful neighbors.

He had always been an outsider, a misfit, the subject of vindictive local gossip and criticism. He had always felt himself more or less allied to inhuman laws and agencies.

His uncle, the only relative he ever remembered, had been a sour, black-hearted brooding old man who tolerated him only because of the chores and errands which he performed. He never had had the slightest doubt that his uncle would have dis-

owned him utterly had he not been a useful drudge. The bond of blood would have been meaningless to the old man.

As a matter of fact, had it not been for his sudden and somewhat mysterious death, the scoundrel probably would have seen to it that his nephew inherited only black memories. But since no will had been located, Emmet Telquist had gained possession of his uncle's rambling farm house and such meager chattels as it contained.

But as he squinted eagerly at the quaint faded hand-writing of the necromancer, Theophilis Wenn, Telquist began to believe that the manuscript book was by far the most valuable item which his evil relative had unintentionally put into his hands.

Furthermore, a number of matters which had always puzzled him in the past became less baffling. He had often wondered about the peculiar behavior of his uncle—his long absences from the house, especially at night, the muttering and mumbling which frequently came from his room, his unexplained sources of income.

With a sense of mounting suspense and expectation, he turned the pages whereon the seventh incantation was inscribed. It was written in a peculiar bluish-grey ink which seemed faintly phosphorescent. He did not dare to read the words; he merely glanced at them, ascertaining that they were what appeared to be merely a jumble of meaningless vowel sounds frequently interspersed with the name "Nyogtha."

Grinning slyly to himself, he turned back the pages and re-read the paragraph which served as an introduction and explanation of the incantations. Well he knew what Theophilis Wenn had in mind when he referred to the "bloodie altar of the Old Ones"! He, Emmet Telquist, had seen such an altar.

Although that had been years before when the swamp was not as nearly impassable as it had since become, he had no doubt that he could locate the accursed sacrificial cromlech. How well he remembered crawling along the faint raised pathway which wound through the swamp! The sudden, unexpected knoll, dark, somehow, even in the midday sunlight, the circle of huge monoliths, the mound in the center, the enormous flat slab on its top, rusty red with an unspeakable eldrich stain which even the rains and winds of centuries could not blot out!

He had never spoken of his discovery to anyone. The swamp was a forbidden place—ostensibly because of rumored quick-sands and poisonous serpents. But on more than one occasion he had seen old-time villagers cross themselves when mention was made of the area. And it was said that even hunting dogs would abandon the pursuit of game which fled into its fastnesses.

Already anticipating the power which would ultimately be his, Emmet Telquist began to formulate plans. He would not make the mistake of the unfortunate Saracen sorcerer, Mal Lazal. Although he did not quite dare to take the necessary steps to secure a human sacrifice, "a childe or chaste maid," a sheep should be relatively easy to obtain. He could steal one at night from any of the several village flocks. He knew all the woods and lanes and would be safely away with his prize long before the loss was discovered.

The night before the advent of the full moon, he slipped into a nearby pasture where sheep were grazed and made away with a fine fat ewe, shoving and dragging it over a stone wall and then leading it off along circuitous back roads and grass-grown lanes.

The next day he paid a stealthy visit to the environs of the

forbidden swamp, exploring the rank underbrush until he discovered the start of the faint trail down which he had stolen years before. Although it was partially obliterated by a thick growth of sedges, vines and lush swamp grass, there were indications that deer used it occasionally. Probably patience would be required to force a way through, but at least the path should not be impassable.

Carefully noting its location, he returned home and completed his preparations for the evening.

Shortly before eleven o'clock he crept into the shed where he had tethered the ewe and led it forth into the moonlight.

The countryside was steeped in a bewitching silver light. He experienced no difficulties in reaching the swamp and after some little searching located the narrow trail.

But as he plunged into the shoulder-high grass, the tether tightened in his hand. The ewe strained against the rope, its eyes suddenly wild with fright.

Cursing, he scrambled around and kicked it brutally. It bolted forward a few yards and stopped. Grimly determined, he tightened the tether until it cut through the ewe's wool into its hide.

He made progress by the foot and by the inch. The ewe had to be dragged and shoved at regular intervals. And as he penetrated toward the heart of the swamp, the increasing height and thickness of the lush undergrowth made passage more difficult.

Moonlight filtered down eerily among the trees and on all sides treacherous pools gleamed silver-black in the shadowy darkness. Occasionally hidden watchers stared at him out of the depths and quite often enormous toads hopped into the path and regarded him with their amber eyes. They seemed to be devoid of fear, almost as if they considered the swamp their special

domain and deemed him incapable of harming them. He began to imagine there was something vaguely malignant about them. He had never seen them so large before, nor in such numbers. But probably that was merely because they were left unmolested in the swamp to breed and develop without encountering the artificial obstacles which would inevitably prevail in any less shunned area.

As he pushed into the heart of the swamp, the gathering silence became oppressive. The ordinary night sounds ceased altogether and only his own strained breathing broke the silence. The ewe became more obstinate than ever; all his strength was required to drag it along. It appeared, he imagined, to sense the fate which awaited it.

Suddenly, so suddenly that he nearly cried aloud in astonishment, the underbrush ended and he was standing at the base of the unhallowed knoll.

It was just as he had remembered it—huge menhirs standing in a rough circle about a central mound upon which lay a large flat slab of a dark hue which did not match the color of the surrounding monoliths. Over all a shadow seemed to fall, and yet when he glanced upward he saw that the full moon stood directly overhead.

Shaking off the sense of dread which closed upon him, he started up the lichen-covered slope. But now the ewe sank upon its forelegs and he was obliged to drag it inch by inch toward the circle of megaliths. He rather welcomed the exertion however, for it freed his mind of the nameless fear which the cromlech aroused in him.

By the time he had dragged the sheep alongside the ring of boulders, he was nearly exhausted, but he dared not pause to rest, for he knew that delay would be his undoing. He already

had a wild desire to leave the ewe and rush back through the toad-infested swamp to the familiar outer world.

Quickly slipping off the sheep's tether, he bound its legs firmly together and with a tremendous heave shoved it onto the rust-colored sacrificial slab.

Rejecting an almost uncontrollable impulse to flee, he unsheathed the hunting knife which he carried and drew from his pocket the curious bound manuscript book, "True Magik" by Theophilis Wenn.

He had no difficulty in locating the strangely sinister seventh incantation, for in the bright moonlight the unusual bluish-grey ink in which the characters were inscribed seemed actually luminous.

Holding the book in one hand and the knife ready in the other, he began to repeat the jumble of unintelligible sounds.

As he read, the syllables appeared to exert some unearthly influence upon him, so that his voice rose to a savage howl, a high-pitched inhuman ululation which penetrated to the farthest depths of the swamp. At intervals his voice sank to low gutturals or a thin sibilant hiss.

And then, at the last enunciation of the oft-repeated word, "Nyogtha," there reached his ears as from a vast distance a sound like the rushing of a mighty wind, although not even a leaf stirred on the surrounding trees.

The book suddenly darkened in his hand and he saw that a shadow had fallen across the page.

He glanced up—and madness reeled in his brain.

Squatting on the edge of the slab was a shape which lived in nightmare, a squamous taloned thing like a monstrous gargoyle or a malformed toad which stared at him out of queesting red eyes.

He froze in horror and a sudden rage flamed in the thing's eyes. It thrust out its neck and an angry hiss issued from its mottled beak.

Emmet Telquist was galvanized into action. He knew what the thing wanted—life blood.

Raising the knife, he advanced and was about to plunge it downward into the sheep when a new horror seized him.

The ewe was already dead. The unspeakable presence which squatted beside it had already claimed it. It had died of fright. Its eyes were glazed and there was no indication that it still breathed.

Remembering Theophilis Wenn's warning, "beware lest the beast be dead," Emmet Telquist stood like a stone statue with the knife still upraised in his hand.

Then he dropped it and ran.

Darting between two menhirs, he plunged down the knoll and raced toward the swamp trail.

Lifting its scaly neck, the presence on the slab looked after him and finally, hissing in fury, bounded off the stone and leaped in pursuit.

One terrible shriek rang out and presently the thing hopped back onto the slab, holding in its bloody beak a dangling lifeless form, a fitting sacrifice.

Delivery of Erdmore Street

IT WAS just before five o'clock on a rainy afternoon in November, and Graley Pung, shipping clerk for Consolidated Preference Industries, was preparing to leave for home. After checking over some late express shipment receipts, he wearily locked up his desk and rose from his chair.

Mr. Pung was a slightly-built man with spindly arms and a harried, ferret-like face, and the burdens of the shipping room weighed heavily upon him. All day long he tied, pasted and hammered together a great variety of bulky cartons and boxes for shipment throughout the country. At frequent intervals his packing was interrupted by the arrival of incoming deliveries. Quite often he had to help complaining truck drivers shove and wrestle unwieldy boxes onto the shipping platform.

It was little wonder that Mr. Pung's thin arms ached at the end of the day, and that sometimes his heart skipped and slowed in its beat as if a ghostly fist had found its way between his ribs and squeezed it mercilessly.

Crossing to the shipping room window, he squinted out at the driving sheets of rain. In spite of his old raincoat, he would probably get wet on the walk home to his room. He coughed, as if in anticipation, and was about to turn from the window when a big van loomed into sight out of the rain and rolled down the

street. With a sinking heart, Mr. Pung watched it draw up beside the shipping platform.

Grumbling to himself, he left the window and started toward the platform. One of these days, he vowed to himself for the thousandth time, Consolidated Preferment Industries was going to find itself without a shipping clerk. They wouldn't find it easy to replace him either. Not everybody would do the work he did for such small pay. And not everyone would work after five o'clock without so much as a thank-you for their pains.

Scowling, he shuffled out onto the darkened shipping platform. The van driver had already left his truck and now he peered up from the side of the platform. For just a second his upturned white face gave Mr. Pung an unpleasant start.

Mr. Pung got a grip on himself. "What's the delivery?" he asked. And then he added, grouchy, "We're supposed to close here at five o'clock you know."

The van driver continued to stare up at him without replying. He appeared to be subjecting Mr. Pung to a very careful scrutiny, almost as if he were measuring him for a physical encounter.

Mr. Pung experienced a sensation of decided discomfort. His flurry of irritation faded away. Suddenly it seemed quite cold on the platform.

He steadied his voice with an effort. "What's your shipment?" he inquired again, evenly.

The van driver's voice sounded unpleasantly metallic and toneless, yet there appeared to be no actual hostility in it. "No shipment," he replied. "Pickup here for Erdmore Street."

Mr. Pung frowned. "Erdmore Street," he repeated. "Pickup for Erdmore Street." Scowling into the shadows, he tried to connect the street name with some relevant item.

Finally he shook his head. "I have no memorandum on anything like that. Do you know what it is you're supposed to pick up?"

"Pickup for Erdmore Street," the van driver repeated tonelessly.

Mr. Pung overcame an impulse to permit himself to become exasperated. He realized that for some reason which he could not specifically name, exasperation would not work with this particular deliveryman.

Mr. Pung became very patient. "I'm sorry, driver, but I have no idea what you're supposed to pick up for delivery on Erdmore Street. Apparently someone put through a late call without giving me a followup memorandum on it. I'd phone the offices, but they're closed now." Long experience had taught Mr. Pung that it was useless to call the offices after ten minutes of five. By five o'clock everyone except himself was out on the street.

Mr. Pung's explanation, however, brought no comment from the driver. He continued to peer up from the bottom of the platform, and Mr. Pung had an uncomfortable feeling that the deliveryman had scarcely been listening at all, that, instead, he had been engaged in minutely inspecting the person of Mr. Pung.

Mr. Pung coughed nervously. "Just a minute," he said. "I'll run through the papers on my desk to make sure I haven't overlooked something on this."

He went inside and although he was perfectly aware that there was no note concerning an Erdmore Street delivery on his desk, he nevertheless shuffled through a sheaf of papers. When he returned to the shipping platform, the van driver was still standing at the foot, staring up out of the semi-darkness.

"Nothing there," Mr. Pung told him with a faint apologetic grin.

The driver said nothing, but continued to look up with an expectant air, as if he considered the business by no means resolved.

Mr. Pung was swiftly approaching a state of suppressed hysteria, when he suddenly had—for him—an inspiration. Erdmore Street, he remembered, was along his homeward route. Why not ride over with the deliveryman and find out what it was that Consolidated Preferment Industries was supposed to deliver?

At this suggestion, the driver nodded. By the time Mr. Pung locked up the shipping room and climbed down from the platform, the taciturn deliveryman was seated behind the wheel of his van.

Mr. Pung got in beside him with a feeling of revulsion which he did not care to analyze. He very definitely, however, did not like the driver's morose air and his white, expressionless face. And now that he was in the van, he didn't like that either. It was fearfully cold, clammy cold. The seat felt almost wet, as if rain had been seeping onto it.

As the van pulled away from the platform, Mr. Pung cleared his throat. "If I can find out what you're supposed to pick up, I'll have it ready first thing in the morning. Afraid that's the best we can do at this hour." And he laughed a nervous little jerk of a laugh which had nothing to do with humor.

Again there was no answer, but Mr. Pung felt rather than saw the driver give him a narrow enigmatic glance which might have been tinged with a faint smirk.

Mr. Pung twisted on the seat. Glancing out, he saw nothing but a blur of rain which now appeared to be changing into a thick drenching mist.

They rode on in silence and Mr. Pung wished that he had

never made his suggestion. Never before had a late afternoon seemed so dreary. The rain, the sullen, unsociable driver, and the stale, damp air of the van filled him with unutterable desolation.

It seemed ages before they reached Erdmore Street. Mr. Pung was half convinced that the driver had made a number of unnecessary detours merely in order to prolong the miserable ride. But perhaps he had been confused because of the heavy mist.

As they turned into Erdmore Street, Mr. Pung spoke. "What's your delivery address on Erdmore Street?"

For the first time since they had entered the van, the driver looked at him squarely. "One thirteen Erdmore Street," he said softly.

Mr. Pung stared at him aghast. "But that's—that's the address of the city morgue!"

For answer the van driver grinned hideously. His slack lips writhed back, revealing discolored teeth set in grey receded gums. His eyes glittered, and his entire face contorted into a wrinkled mask of obscene merriment.

Mr. Pung screamed—and lunged for the door handle. But he never turned it. The van jolted suddenly against a curbstone, mounted it and then crunched into a telephone pole where it came to rest.

The next day the local paper carried a sizable paragraph entitled "Weird Accident." A truck had crashed into a telephone pole in front of the city morgue on Erdmore Street. Inside the truck, police had found a dead man identified as a Mr. Pung. Oddly enough, the morgue doctors concluded that he had died of a heart attack, rather than of any injuries received in the accident. Also, although no one else was found in the van, it did not appear that Mr. Pung had been driving. Mr. Pung, in fact, did

not possess a driver's license and so far as anyone knew had never learned to drive.

When the police found that the wrecked van did not carry any registration plates, they decided that the driver, escaping from the accident unscathed, and undoubtedly frightened by the sudden demise of Mr. Pung, had fled afoot through the mist in order to avoid prosecution.

And there was no one to dispute their theory.

The Way to the Attic

IT ALL happened nearly thirty years ago. I was a young writer, down on my luck. I had quit my job and taken to the typewriter, without success. I was finally forced to leave my comfortable furnished room and search for a cheaper one.

After two days' trudging (I slept in a sort of flophouse hotel one night) I ran across Mrs. Midgelington's big frame house on Farnaby Street.

The neighborhood had gone to seed. It was starting down the long slide which led from "genteel poverty" to stark squalor. The hedges were half dead, the grass shaggy, the sidewalks cracked. But I was floating on my last twenty dollars.

The sign reading "Furnished Rooms" bore a visible greasy thumbprint along one edge. I rang the bell.

Mrs. Midgelington inspected me without enthusiasm. She was wrapped in a limp-looking flowered bathrobe and her puffy red-rimmed grey eyes squinted out from under a mop of mouse-colored hair which resembled the stuffing burst out of old upholstery.

I followed her up a flight of stairs worn shallow by the feet of that ancient brotherhood—unhonored and anonymous—the "furnished roomers," who come and go by the score, by the

hundreds, whose feet tread a thousand dark stairwells, a thousand dim hallways, lost and still searching to the very end.

My room was poorly-lighted, small and shabbily furnished, but it was only five dollars a week. I took it.

I settled in with my one suit, my second-hand portable typewriter and a few stationery supplies.

The battle did not go well. I got up early, wrote all morning, took a walk in the afternoon and wrote again in the evening, but the bulky envelopes kept right on coming back.

At length, with thirty-seven cents left in my pockets, I answered a newspaper advertisement and took a job as part-time shipping clerk at a food-storage warehouse. My shift ran from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., six evenings a week. I was paid a dollar an hour. I didn't like the work but my net pay of \$26 a week seemed substantial at the time. I could pay my board and still have three dollars a day for food. That was plenty in those days. If I needed anything extra, I skipped a few meals to make up the difference.

I got back to my room by midnight and to bed by one, so that if I turned out around eight, I still had most of the day for writing.

I was just beginning to pull ahead when the warehouse decided to close at six on Saturday evening and at ten during the rest of the week. This meant my gross pay was cut from \$30 a week to \$20, the net being about \$17. I began to skip more meals.

At about this time my clothes began to come apart. It was impossible for me to replace them; I sewed and patched as well as I could. When my bare foot met the sidewalk, I darned socks and put cardboard fillers in my shoes.

Life went on drearily in my shabby furnished room. I sold

one verse for \$5 but otherwise the manuscripts rushed back with relentless regularity. New tenants came and went; I rarely got on more than nodding terms with them.

For some reason Mrs. Midgelington seemed to favor me. Looking back now, I suppose it was because I didn't sneak women up to my room and didn't get drunk and rowdy like some of the other roomers.

Anyway, I was the recipient of various small favors. Mrs. Midgelington put up clean new curtains in my room; she fetched my mail; once when I had a cold she brought me some cough syrup.

One day she gave me an old blank ledger which she had found somewhere. She thought I could use it. As a matter of fact, I found it just right for note-keeping. On another occasion she brought me a pocketknife which some roomer had forgotten. And one day when the cold was cutting through my cardboard soles, she came in with a pair of shoes which she said that I might have for a dollar. They were just a trifle large, but I whipped out a dollar without quibbling. Ordinarily I would balk at second-hand footwear, but I was desperate, my feet were constantly cold and the shoes were in good condition. I supposed they had been abandoned by a roomer who left in a hurry—possibly with bloodhounds of the law closing fast on his trail. It was not my business, in any case.

As winter came on, the warehouse got colder and colder, and I nearly froze to death on the windy shipping platform as I waited for trucks to load. Even after hot coffee, I'd come home shivering. And by then there would be no heat in my room either.

About this time a story I'd felt was a sure winner hurried back like the rest and I experienced something bordering on de-

spair. Never before had a rejection hit me so hard. I'd come home late at night and sit on the side of my bed, brooding.

I didn't sleep well and I began to neglect my writing. Suddenly my youthful dreams seemed highflown and foolish. I felt that I was a failure, that my life would never amount to anything.

After working at the warehouse like a robot, I would come back to my cold room, slump in the one half-comfortable chair and just look at the floor. I couldn't get to sleep and when I tried to read, I couldn't concentrate. Everything seemed hopeless, futile, inane, meaningless. When manuscripts came back, I no longer sent them out again; I merely piled them in a corner and forgot about them. Soon there were no more out and so no more came back.

I finally got into the habit of wandering along the corridors late at night—across to the lavatory, down to the vestibule, up and down the stairs. I developed a vague feeling that I was searching for something, though I had no idea what it was.

One night, later than usual, I noticed a flight of stairs leading up to the garret. I had seen them before, I suppose, but somehow they hadn't registered. But this night they seemed to hold an odd attraction for me. I climbed them at once and found myself in an icy dark attic. A faint blur of illumination filtered through a skylight. As I groped around, a string brushed my face; I pulled it and the dimmest bulb imaginable went on. It didn't give much more light than a firefly.

I stumbled around, searching for I knew not what. The entire big, bare-raftered room was littered with broken furniture, moth-eaten rugs and sprung suitcases.

I stayed quite a while, poking around, inspecting the walls and the rafters. At length, up near the light bulb, driven deep

into the rafters, I noticed a heavy iron hook. I was not surprised when I saw it, in fact the sight of it gave me a queer little *frisson*. It was as if I had known it was there all the time.

After that, I began going up to the attic almost every night. The darkness and the desolate look of the place seemed to suit my mood. I'd just sit there, as if I were waiting for something. I wasn't sure what it was. It seemed like something building up inside me.

I no longer wrote at all, and I worked at the warehouse mechanically. New roomers came and departed, but paid no attention to me. Mrs. Midgelington was so tired by early evening, I doubt that she ever heard me walking along the corridors and up the attic stairs. Only one thing annoyed me—some of the floor boards creaked quite audibly. I was always afraid that a roomer, hearing me in the halls so late at night, would think that I was prowling around in order to steal something. That might be awkward, and I hated scenes.

One evening a truck driver left a rope lying on the shipping platform. For some reason I picked it up and brought it back to my room. For an hour or more that night I sat tying knots. I found it soothing.

And then one rainy night when I opened my pay envelope, I found the proverbial pink slip. It was actually pink and it stated that my services at the warehouse were terminated as of said date. I had been warned, previously, that I was making too many mistakes, but at the time I merely shrugged.

Strangely enough, instead of being crushed by the news, I experienced a paradoxical sense of secret elation. I felt relieved, as if a decision I had been avoiding had finally been made for me.

As I walked back to my room through the rain, I kept thinking about the attic. After the turmoil, confusion and irritations

of the warehouse shipping platform, it seemed like such a peaceful place. It was cold, of course, but I didn't seem to mind that so much anymore.

That evening I sat tying knots in my room till after midnight. Then I stole into the hall and climbed the stairs which led to the attic. I put on the one dim bulb and for a long time just sat there on a battered old steamer trunk. As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, I could see the big iron hook fixed to the rafters overhead. I wondered that it had taken me so long to comprehend its significance. It was the easy and obvious solution to all my problems. It would be senseless, I told myself, to struggle on. My writing had come to nothing. I was out of a job with no prospects of another. But worse than all this—I had lost my zest for life. My energies and my enthusiasms had simply ebbed away. To writhe on, ground down by poverty, I assured myself, would be ridiculous.

I got up and started down the stairs for the rope.

I had nearly reached my room when a board creaked loudly. A nearby door opened and an ugly male face scowled out at me. I could see suspicion etched in every acidulous line of that sneering face.

And I could feel the two sullen eyes boring into my back even after I entered my own room and closed the door. I felt humiliated—and furious. I knew I could never make another trip to the attic that night. Could there be no peace, no dignity, no privacy, even as one sought oblivion? I asked myself.

Furious with the prying fool who had ruined my plans, I paced my room for hours. At length I sat down and I suppose fell asleep from complete exhaustion.

I passed the next day fretfully, never leaving my room. My only meal consisted of water and a few crackers. I waited impatiently for night to descend. No one disturbed me.

At last darkness came and gradually the house grew quiet. I sat on the edge of my bed, hour after hour, waiting. Finally, near midnight, when darkness and silence had spread their sooty soft wings over every dreary cell in that dreary house, I stood up and started for my door, rope in hand. I knew what I had to do.

Just as I neared the door, a board creaked underfoot, not too loudly, but audibly. Remembering the incident of the previous evening, I felt a surge of exasperation. I certainly didn't want to be interrupted a second time!

As I looked down, I had an inspiration. Bending, I slipped off my shoes. In my stocking feet, I assured myself, there was far less chance of my making noise. And of course I wouldn't need the shoes anymore!

As I reached the door and started to turn the handle, the strangest thing happened. It seemed so weird and inexplicable at the time, that I find it hard to describe. The best I can do is to say that I very suddenly appeared to awaken from a trance-like state. I felt that I had all at once shaken off the effect of some drug, of some poisonous narcotic which had seized hold of my mind.

I stared at the rope in my hand with horror. Sweat broke out on my face and I began to tremble. Dropping the rope, I staggered to my bed and slumped down in consternation. What had happened to me? I asked myself. I had everything to live for. I was young and healthy and full of ideas. What matter that I had lost a \$20-a-week job? that my stories weren't selling yet? I could get another job and I still had decades of time in which to try my hand at story writing. There were thousands of people, I told myself, worse off than I, and still they struggled on.

Why had I so easily given way to despair? I gazed at the rope lying on the floor as if it were a coiled cobra. Then my eyes slid across to the shoes I had just slipped off.

I don't know how long it took before the truth burst upon me—five minutes perhaps. I just kept staring at the shoes and for some reason which I couldn't name, they seemed far more lethal than the rope. Then two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle clicked together in my head: reviewing the past several months, I realized that my siege of apathy and slow despair had begun just after I acquired the shoes from Mrs. Midgelington. And those shoes had taken me out into the halls and corridors of the house when I didn't know where I was going or what I was seeking. They had taken me up to the icy attic—up to the hook in the rafters . . .

It was all too fantastic, I told myself, and yet . . . Suddenly I realized that I had to know, immediately, without delay. I could not wait till morning to find out.

Fumbling under the bed, I found my old shoes with the cardboard soles and put them on. Then I lifted the other pair of shoes, held them gingerly between my left thumb and forefinger and opened the door.

I walked down the hall and knocked at Mrs. Midgelington's door. I knocked for ten minutes before she woke up and asked who was there. Then I heard a bolt slide back and the door cracked open. An accusing eye, an eye like a clouded agate, peered out.

I held up the shoes. "These shoes. Where did you get them?"

Even in the dim light cast by one dusty hall bulb, Mrs. Midgelington's face took on a look of guilt. She hesitated.

"I demand to know!" I exclaimed fiercely.

"They was Mr. Slumer's shoes," she whispered finally.

"Mr. Slumer roomed here?"

She nodded.

"And what," I asked, "did Mr. Slumer do up in the attic?"

Mrs. Midgelington's face, I fancied, changed color—from a sort of putty grey to paper white.

She didn't reply and I repeated my question in a louder voice.

Mrs. Midgelington looked at the closed doors along the corridor apprehensively and brought her eyes back to my face. She must have known that if I repeated the question a third time, I would shout it.

Her voice was barely audible. "Mr. Slumer hung himself in the attic."

I more or less expected the reply, but it still silenced me for a minute. I stared at her.

"How did you get his shoes?" I asked at length.

I could see her struggling to put words together. "They was in the attic. Come off, likely, after he kicked the box away. They said the knot was wrong and 'is face was a 'orrible sight. 'e didn't go quick, they said. Strangled, 'stead of goin' with a broken neck. Likely he kept twistin' there and just sort of kicked off the shoes."

I nodded. "Go on."

"They carried him down to his room without the shoes. Likely they hardly noticed. When the funeral men come, they took another pair of shoes was in his room."

"I see," I said. "So you brought the shoes from the attic and finally sold them to me?"

"They was good shoes, Mr. Brennan; I didn't see no harm in it. If you want the dollar back—"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. Incidentally I'll be leaving, come daylight. Right now I'm going down to the cellar and throw these shoes in the furnace."

The round agate eyes regarded the shoes sorrowfully.

I started away and then stopped with an afterthought. "By the way, Mrs. Midgelington, which room did Mr. Slumer occupy?"

Again she hesitated; the agate eyes grew more cloudy.

My voice was soft. "You gave me Mr. Slumer's room, didn't you, Mrs. Middelington?"

She nodded. "It's a nice room, Mr. Brennan."

I sighed and turned away. I didn't care to know anything more about Mr. Slumer. Maybe he had wanted to be a writer . . .

I went down to the cellar, threw the shoes in the coal furnace and watched them burn. Then I packed up my few possessions and waited for daylight.

I found a room in a different part of town. Not long afterward I got a job in a hospital admissions office for \$30 a week. And the rejected story which I had felt was a sure winner sold to another magazine. Later, other sales followed.

I didn't set the world ablaze but I earned a living and I managed to claw my way a few rungs up the slippery ladder of literary success.

It all happened nearly thirty years ago, but from time to time I still have a certain nightmare.

I've got on Mr. Slumer's shoes and I'm climbing Mrs. Middelington's stairs to the icy attic where there's a big hook fixed in the rafters.

Mr. Octbur

HE HAD left a long time ago and now, finally, he was returning. The cold winds of autumn were rattling dry leaves along the streets when he entered town. A late afternoon sun slanted its light against the buildings. He looked around in bewilderment.

Much of the old town, as he remembered it, was gone. Half of it? Two-thirds of it? Most of the old brick buildings, blackened with the soot and grime of a century, had been replaced by chromium-fronted horrors, plate-glass, parking-lots. Oh, not all of them. He found a few survivors and inspected them lovingly. But most were gone. Some of the very streets had disappeared.

He wandered disconsolately. The sun slanted lower and the wind rose, a late autumn wind, a cold and keening wind which seemed to mourn for every vanished thing, a wind blowing out of the all-but-forgotten past, bringing with it the flavor and the memory of other autumns lost in time.

Occasionally, as he chanced across an old house, or an old brick building which had somehow escaped the destroyer's sledge, the memories flooded back—memories from forty, yes, fifty years ago. He would stand, motionless, reminiscing, while the passers-by moved like ghosts, like wraiths out of an alien dimension of time.

Amazingly, as the wind rose and the sun sank, his powers of

memory recaptured a clarity which he would have thought impossible of attainment. He found that he could recall entire streets, whole areas, as they had existed a half century before. He had scarcely realized that he possessed such a faculty. What was it they called it? Photographic memory?

He walked about slowly in the dusk, remembering everything. All he needed was a single landmark, even a remembered street-name, and it all came back.

Yes, here was the old ice-house, and over there the buckle factory. Right next to the corner was the harness shop, then the stables and across the street, Mrs. Donley's big brick boarding house. Further along was Mr. Evan's little store, Wayne's barber shop and then old Mr. Gruber's shoe-repair place. Yes, yes, he could remember them all. And then the nice residential streets, the brick sidewalks, the cool, shadowed front porches, screened by wisteria vines. Right here was Marley's house, then Keenan's, Hopemore's, Havey's . . . Yes, he remembered every one! As he walked along he thought he could hear the creak of front-porch swings. Did someone call to him out of the dusk? Mr. Octbur! Mr. Octbur! Or did he only imagine it?

He walked on and now the cold seemed to be settling in. The wind moaned dolefully; a scarf of sudden leaves swirled down the sidewalk and then abruptly disbursed like skirmishers. Somewhere nearby—in someone's garden yard—he could hear the rasp and rustle of autumn corn stalks. A cricket chirped and then grew silent. What was happening?

What? Ah, he knew! Frost was settling in on the cold evening wind. It was coming down out of the cold sky, coming up out of the cold earth, and soon its silver would shine in the moonlight. The crickets would be stiffened into final silence, the corn stalks would freeze into whitened spikes which even the rising wind would no longer rattle.

It was like an evening he had known so many years ago, like an autumn evening out of vanished time, the same frosty moonlight silence pervading the old town. It seemed as if fifty years might be shrugged off like a fleeting dream, like an ephemeral interlude lost in the landscape of time.

Time and memory! And the key was his! He walked and remembered. The old town as he had known it returned in the eerie moonlight. The silent silver streets came back again. Gaslight gleamed in the houses. He heard the muted tinkle of pianos, voices mingled in harmony, the old songs come to life again!

He turned toward home. Past the old school, over the wooden railroad bridge and down the little hill. Yes, nothing was changed. There was the Madigan house, the Janmer house, the Chanrey place, then the empty lot and then . . .

Yes, it was still there, the old Octbur house, every brick still intact, gaslight shining in the front parlour, the sound of rather mournful music.

He went up the brick walk, up the wooden steps. Someone opened the door and he stepped in.

The next day the Octburs told everyone he was a distant relative who had strayed back and that they were taking him in. He'd sit on the porch in the evening, in the cold autumn moonlight, with a shawl around his shoulders. During the day he'd stand by the gate and watch the brewery wagons rattle past.

He was content and at peace, although the Octbur household was not exactly a merry one. There had been tragedy, they told him, a long time ago.

One of the young Octbur boys had wandered off one cold autumn night and never returned. Yes, it was a long time ago. They had looked everywhere. Everywhere . . .

He wasn't sure about it himself, but he sometimes wondered. Something about it puzzled him, nagged at him. Had they really looked *everywhere*—including the dim, kaleidoscopic corridors of vanished time, those haunted corridors he himself seemed to know so well?

Frowning, he'd sit on the porch and think about it, while the slow frost settled in . . .

Episode on Cain Street

IF YOU should pick up a recent street map of New Haven and search carefully for Cain Street, you will not find it. It no longer exists. But I have good reason to remember it.

About ten years ago as I write this, New Haven, or at least large areas of it, existed substantially as it had nearly a hundred years before. There were many old brick buildings, both homes and shops, weathered by the sun, the snows and the rains of over a century. A majority of them, I admit, were darkened by accumulated decades of dust and soot, but I never found this displeasing. I considered it merely the patina of time. When the late afternoon sun slanted against these buildings, they had a soft mellow appearance which new brick could never duplicate.

I knew that "the old city," as I thought of these venerable areas, was doomed. Plans were afoot to smash down virtually everything out of the past and to replace it by huge ugly rectangles of steel, plate glass and synthetic stone—to house shopping centers, industrial plants and offices, as well as the city's teeming swarms who existed from generation to generation on permanent welfare.

Aware that most structures out of the past were scheduled to be demolished, I prowled the old streets endlessly, overcome with nostalgia for vanished days, filled with a desolation of the spirit which words can scarcely describe.

Although I existed in the present, I lived in the past. I longed for the days lost in time with an intensity which colored my whole life. My allegiance, my interests and my affections were all rooted in the previous century. The present, with its noise, its unending pressures and its monstrous, dehumanized savagery, I despised. I hungered for the past as an addict hungers for his opiate.

It was useless to argue with me. I lived in the past and for the past and I would not change.

Several times, as I wandered about on my solitary rambles, I noticed another lone walker whom I recognized by his rather quaint mode of dress—a black jacket and trousers, a black string tie and high black hook-lace shoes. I invariably ran onto him in the oldest part of town. Sometimes he would be strolling along the brick sidewalks, with his head down as if he were lost in a trance. On other occasions he would be standing motionless on a corner, staring at some ancient house with an intensity which was arresting.

He was of average height, but so cadaverously thin that he looked taller than he was. His rather fine-drawn face appeared to be that of a middle-aged man, although I noticed snowy white hair along the edge of his wide-brimmed black hat. If a color must be mentioned, his eyes were grey; I always thought of them, however, as being colorless, the color of water, the color of wind. Paradoxically perhaps, their gaze could be piercing as I later learned. His entire expression was enigmatic, secretive, guarded. And I thought that at times I read fear in that fine-drawn face.

As time went on, we began to meet with increasing frequency. Idiotically, we each pretended that the other party did not exist, that neither of us had seen the other.

Meanwhile, plans were hastened for the destruction of "the

old city." The heavy, brutal, unselective sledgehammer hand of "progress" could not be stayed.

As it was borne in upon me that the old buildings and streets which I loved were to be pulverized even sooner than I had expected, I prowled them with greater frequency, particularly during the late afternoon, at dusk and at night. I haunted them like a tormented wraith. And I was tormented; the thought of their imminent destruction chilled my soul and almost made me physically ill. In fact, my appetite vanished and I lost considerable weight.

I worshipped at the shrine of the past; its destruction affected me like the attack of some actual disease. I roamed restlessly, feverishly, cursing the smug asses who measured "progress" by so-called "growth statistics"—the number of new insufferably ugly buildings, the number of widened streets, new parking lots, the number of new "units" to be occupied by the swarming pauper-criminal element which casts its purchased vote for continuously bigger handouts.

At length, I met my black-attired fellow-roamer almost daily. We finally got to eye each other tentatively, but still neither of us spoke. At last, fate, in the form of a sudden and violent late summer thunderstorm, brought us together.

I was far from my own bleak lodgings, in the deepest part of the old city, an area of venerable brick factories, time-worn brick and frame houses, brick sidewalks and narrow cobblestone streets and lanes. Not far away I glimpsed the spire of an old stone church (long since pounded into rubble) where my grandfather had been organist many years before.

The storm came up without warning just before dusk. There were only a few rolls of warning thunder and the rain came down in sustained driving sheets. I stepped into the nearby doorway of a small abandoned shop building and found it far

shallower than I had thought it to be. The rain beat into my little retreat; I hunched against the door, trying to decide whether to stay where I was and get thoroughly soaked, or make a run for some other cover.

As I clung there, miserably, darkness came on and the storm grew steadily worse. I was just about to bolt out in hopes of finding a better doorway when a terrific flash of blue lightning lit up the entire street. In that brief, all but blinding glare, he of the black attire hurried past. Miraculously, for what reason I will never know, he turned and saw me.

He stopped, beckoned and said something; a sudden ear-shattering crash of thunder drowned out his words. But I understood that he was offering me shelter, or succor of some kind. I sprinted out of my rain-streaked doorway and hurried after him.

We rushed along in silence for about a block and then he turned in at a little house. I caught only a glimpse of it but I saw that it was brick and that it appeared to be as old as any I had ever seen in the city.

Now thoroughly drenched, I followed my rescuer into a darkened hallway. "Wait here a moment," he instructed.

He entered another room, fumbled about briefly, and presently the mellow glow of gaslight drove back the darkness. He bade me enter. As I stood, dripping, he bent to an old-fashioned fireplace. In what seemed only moments crackling tongues of fire were licking up a neatly-stacked pile of cordwood.

"Stand close," he told me.

I obeyed, willingly enough; the water seeped out of my clothes onto the clean varnished wood of a wide-planked floor. As I turned about near the fire, he left the room but soon reappeared bearing a bottle, glasses and a sort of long-handled copper pot.

"I don't know how I can ever thank you—" I began.

He waved me to silence. "Shelter from the storm. Little enough. Any gentleman would grant it; it merits no thanks."

Seemingly oblivious to his own wet clothing, he poured liquid into the pot and held it over the flames. "Hot rum," he explained, "better without the butter."

Presently we were both seated before the fire, sipping the best hot rum in the world. My unexpected host introduced himself as Thaddeus Woolson. For some time he remained taciturn but as the warmth of the crackling wood and the warmth of the rum had their combined effect, he began to talk. I was scarcely surprised to learn that, even as I, he was an antiquarian and a lover of the past. But I was amazed at his seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of old New Haven. He knew local history, in the most minute detail, for two hundred years back. He could recount century-old local incidents with the clarity of a recent eyewitness. He could describe streets, even whole areas of the city, as they had existed a century and a half ago.

He only shrugged when I expressed my astonishment. "I have spent my entire life studying the past. With rigid training, one's powers of retention improve."

When I mentioned my distress at the thought of the imminent destruction which would soon wipe out most of the old city, a grey shadow fell across his face.

He stared into the flames for long minutes before speaking. "Yes, I know it is coming. And I think my own days are numbered also. It is as well. I have no desire to live on once all the past has been destroyed."

Although I understood his feelings perfectly, I tried to cheer him up. "You must not give way to despair. They can't destroy *everything!*"

He smiled bitterly. "On the contrary. Man has become the great destroyer. The destruction of a mere city has become an incident in his lethal career!"

He lapsed into brooding silence and said little more.

As I sipped the last of my drink, I looked around the plainly-furnished room. It had a colonial look—the look of a room of about 1790—simple hand-constructed chairs and tables, braided rugs on a plank floor, old-fashioned pewter and a little china on a simple sideboard. Candles and whale-oil lamps had given way to gaslight, but the gaslight fixtures were, I think, the most modern innovations in the room.

As the thunder became only a distant mutter and the driving rain turned to a misty drizzle, I rose to go. My host accompanied me to the door and again brushed aside my thanks.

"You must come again," he told me. "We have much to discuss."

I assured him that nothing could now keep me away. He smiled enigmatically and closed the door.

Glancing upward as I reached the end of the block, I saw that my new acquaintance lived on Cain Street. I recalled it from previous walks in the area; I knew it was one of the oldest single-block streets in the city.

As I trudged home through the mist, I experienced the eerie feeling that I had fallen asleep in the rain-streaked shop doorway and dreamed the entire episode concerning my black-attired friend.

But it was no dream. I met him soon again and as the days passed became a frequent evening guest in his little brick house on Cain Street.

I would willingly sit for hours while he talked of the past. He had the power to make it come alive in a way which I would

have thought impossible. His memory was prodigious and inexhaustible. Many a night I walked home long after midnight still caught up in the spell of his narratives and anecdotes. Sometimes at dusk we walked together and he would point out specific houses and buildings, giving me their history in detail for a hundred years back, or even longer in many cases.

Soon after we began our walks together, the destruction of the old city began. Bulldozers, trucks and the modern equivalents of battering-rams took over in force. One by one the old buildings were pounded into oblivion. Grit spread on the streets and a pall of dust hung in the air. On a number of occasions fire broke out in the ruins after dark.

As soon as the engines of annihilation began to operate, I noticed a distinct and disturbing change in my new friend, Thaddeus Woolson. The skin on his fine-drawn face seemed stretched tighter than ever; his pale grey eyes looked hot and feverish; if possible, his thin frame became even more cadaverous. I tried to comfort him, pointing out that at least something of the past could be preserved in letters, books, in antique objects and so on. In fact, I urged him to write a history of old New Haven himself. But he seemed deaf to all my commiserations and suggestions. He admitted, finally, that he should have written a local history long ago. When I urged him to begin at once, however, a look of infinite weariness came into his eyes. "It is now too late," he replied, "my energies are ebbing with every hour that passes."

Necessarily, our walks became more and more circumscribed. Slowly but steadily the sledge and the massive, smashing steel spheres closed in.

I now became extremely worried about Woolson and made a point to seek him out every day. He kept to his little house on

Cain Street most of the time, only taking a very short walk as dusk descended.

At length his appearance became so alarming, I urged him to see a doctor. It was useless. He would make no effort to pull out of the slough of spiritual depression and physical enervation which had overtaken him. His facial bones looked as if they would break through the skin which was stretched over them. His red-rimmed eyes began to glitter. And yet I could do nothing.

For many years I had collected photographs of old New Haven; I had promised to carry them over for my friend's perusal but somehow had never got to it. It occurred to me early one evening that the present might be the perfect time to bring them to him. For a few hours at least they might take his mind from the whirlwind of destruction which was destroying the city as he had known it. And perhaps they might comfort him to some small degree.

I brought them out and began to look through them, using a large magnifying glass, as was my custom, to bring out detail. With its aid, shop signs, otherwise undecipherable, could be read, store fronts, vehicles and even faces could be brought vividly into the eye's clear focus.

I had got about halfway through the collection, when I picked up a street photograph with the caption: "Chapel and State Streets, 1842." There was nothing remarkable about the photograph. It showed a dusty-looking intersection with a few shops, sidewalks under old-fashioned wooden awnings and a number of horse-drawn carts and wagons. A group of people were standing on the corner, dressed in the fashion of the period. On an impulse I held the magnifying glass to these early idlers. As I did so, the face of one of them almost made me drop the glass. It was the face of my friend, Thaddeus Woolson! Of course I

knew this was impossible. Laughing at my own sense of shock, I realized at once that I was looking at one of his ancestors, a grand-parent, I presumed. Such resemblances are by no means uncommon.

Placing the photograph on the top of the collection, I slipped them all into a shoe box and started out for my friend's house on Cain Street.

It was a disheartening walk across the city. Entire blocks had now been razed. One whole street had completely disappeared. The reek of wet plaster and stone dust hung in the damp autumn air.

Woolson greeted me cordially enough, but to my intense disappointment showed little interest in the photograph. When I pointed out his likeness peering up from a street corner in 1842, he appeared to be momentarily startled, but he soon put down the picture.

"Thaddeus Woolson, my great-grandfather and namesake," he commented, as if the coincidence was of no importance. "I have his tintype somewhere about."

I gathered up the photographs with a sigh and he lapsed into silence.

As the succeeding days passed and the bulldozers, like some new breed of nightmare brick-eating dinosaurs, crunched ever closer to Cain Street, Thaddeus Woolson rarely left his house. All my arguments had no effect. He would either sit without speaking a word, or pace the floor feverishly. He appeared to be haunted by the fear of some impending catastrophe which could not be escaped. I began to believe that he might be affected by brain fever, or that he might actually be going mad.

I, too, abhorred the destruction of the old city. Though at times I had become ill thinking about it, and then finally seeing it, I determined that I would survive as an individual and con-

tinue, as well as I could, to preserve whatever remained which pertained to the past—if only ancient records and written histories.

While I could sympathize with Thaddeus Woolson's despair, I did my best to combat it. But my efforts came to nothing.

At last, inevitably, my friend received a final property condemnation notice. He had been advised to move many months previously, but had made no attempt to find other quarters. For blocks around Cain Street the houses and shops were now deserted; the area resembled a miniature ghost city. Only a few rats and an occasional human derelict wandered about the forlorn streets.

As I entered the brick house on Cain Street one evening, my friend gestured toward the condemnation notice which lay on a nearby table. Judging by his expression, it might have been a sentence of death.

I tried to reason with him, pointing out that the municipality would pay him a fair price for his property as soon as he filled out the necessary papers. He might even hire an attorney, I added, and perhaps raise the settlement price.

He shrugged. "Money means nothing to me now," he commented with a finality which chilled me.

I left soon afterwards, feeling that I could do nothing more. If he refused to leave, his possessions would be carried to the street and he would be forcibly removed from the premises. It was absurd, I felt, to carry matters to such a senseless extreme.

One wild November night, while the wind moaned and sighed through the abandoned buildings of the old city, I set out once again for the house on Cain Street. Ruins lay on every side as I entered the condemned area. Cold moonlight glittered down alleyways strewn with broken window glass. Broken shutters banged and clapped as the wind swung them to and fro.

Forgotten doors half off their hinges creaked, slammed shut, creaked and slammed again. Not a pedestrian nor a moving vehicle was in sight. Every block or two I came across trucks, bulldozers and derricks parked in some lot, silently awaiting the next day's onslaught. Houses a hundred years old were heaps of brick. Old churches, stores and shops were nothing but littered fragments piled in a cellar hole. The seal of desolation, of abandonment, lay on every side. And as I started down Cain Street, the wild wind never stopped wailing.

Thaddeus Woolson did not respond to my tap with the old-fashioned brass door knocker. I tried the door, found it unlocked, and entered.

My friend sat slumped at a table, head in hands, the condemnation notice lying before him. The gas lights had long since been disconnected and now only a single candle lit the room. As the wind whipped inside and shadows leaped about, he looked up.

I gasped, staring at him with dismay. In the few days since my last visit he had failed appallingly. His gaunt, yellow, red-eyed face resembled that of a mummy. He looked years older than when I had seen him last.

I backed toward the door. "I—I will call an ambulance at once!" I assured him.

His wasted face twisted into a snarl. "Close the door, you fool!" His eyes fixed on mine like those of a madman. I closed the door and sat down nearby.

He dropped his head again and for a full five minutes sat motionless. Finally he raised his head. "I am sorry," he said, "but I am not myself; the end is swiftly approaching." His voice was now calm, but for some reason I found it more frightening than before.

"Is there nothing I can do?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Time will have its way with me; I can hold out no longer."

"But surely—"

He held up his hand. "Listen to me. You have been my friend—my only friend of recent years—and you deserve a final explanation. Are you aware of the true nature of time?"

I shifted in my chair uneasily, while his red-rimmed eyes seemed to shine with some kind of raging inward fever as he stared at me.

At last I spoke, frowning. "I assume that time is a dimension, subject to physical laws."

"It is that and more than that. Did it never occur to you that time is intricately bound up with *place*, with *milieu*? That time, essentially, is *change*? And that if one could, as it were, step aside from the time stream in a relatively unchanging milieu, he might—given sufficient will power and force of concentration—escape being carried forward on the tide of time?" His glittering eyes bored into mine.

"I hadn't thought of it in quite that way," I admitted.

"*Well, I tell you it is true!*" he exclaimed. "Why do you think I have clung so firmly to the old city—and now to this very house? Why do you think I have aged so terribly these past few days? *Can you not guess?*" His voice had become shrill; in the dim candle light his eyes looked actually phosphorescent.

I was convinced that he was indeed going mad. I tried to soothe him. "It is an interesting subject," I replied evasively, "but perhaps we could discuss it better at another time."

He caught at my last phrase. "Another time! There is no other time! Time has finished with me! There is no time left! I tell you—Hark!" He stopped speaking and stood up, listening.

In the near distance I heard the clank and roar of machinery starting up.

He stared at me. "What is that?"

I hesitated. "Well— I did read something in the papers about the area demolition being far behind schedule. I believe the article said something about an all-night shift."

"Abysmal wretches!" he shouted. "They cannot even leave me a final night! Before morning they will be here—at this very house!" He stared around wildly.

The roar and grind of trucks, bulldozers and allied apparatuses of annihilation grew in volume.

I stood up, intending to be firm with him. "You must gather up your personal papers and possessions and leave as soon as possible!" I told him. "Come, I will help you. After all, you were supposed to be out of here weeks ago."

He sat down. "I shall never leave this house," he said quietly. "Let them come then. It is too late. You had better go."

"Absolutely not!" I told him indignantly. "I cannot leave you like this."

He shrugged. "Very well then. You have been warned. The consequences will not be pleasant to behold. I have been—" He broke off and lapsed into a spasm of racking coughs which went on and on. It sounded as if his lungs were being torn piecemeal out of his chest. When he finally stopped, perspiration streamed down his face. He looked so grey, wrinkled and altogether ghastly that, in spite of myself, I shuddered.

"Since you will not leave," he whispered at last, "I may as well tell you the entire truth. You remember that street-corner photograph you showed me—the one taken in 1842?"

I nodded. "I remember it very well. You said the person who resembled you so strikingly was your great-grandfather."

He smiled faintly. "Well, it was not—it was me!"

I studied his face closely. Though he might be mad, he was certainly not "pulling my leg."

I decided to humor him. "Very well. Let me see then. That photograph was taken a hundred and thirteen years ago, and since you appeared to be about forty years old, that would now make you approximately a hundred and fifty-three years old."

He inclined his head. "Your figuring is good enough. But actually I was already seventy-two years old when that photograph was taken in 1842. I was born in 1770."

"I see. If I am correct then," I replied, "you are now a hundred and eighty-five years old?"

"Just so. I have escaped the time stream for well over a century. By living only in the past, day and night, by dreaming of the past, *by willing myself into the past*, I have survived."

He paused, then shook his head. "But I am lost now. Concentration such as I have long exerted is not enough in itself. One must continue to exist in the same milieu. One must have about one's self much out of the past, much that has come down unchanged. That is essential. I have survived for years in an ever-dwindling island. I might survive even yet for a brief time in this very house, but—"

His voice broke and he groaned. "No, I could not. It is too late, too late! My strength is gone."

His head slumped on the table and I thought he had fainted. But suddenly as a change in the wind brought the roar of machinery clearly into earshot, he leaped up again.

"Can they give me no peace? Must my last hours be spent in torment? I tell you that hellish noise is tearing my brain into *shreds!*" He screamed the last word and went on screaming. It was the uncontrollable shrieking of a madman.

I sat speechless, paralyzed, utterly transfixed by that awful sound.

Abruptly the screaming stopped, only to be succeeded by the

same tearing cough which had racked him before. This time it was far worse. As I watched, horrified, blood gushed from his mouth.

He staggered to his feet, clawing at his throat. His face had become literally indescribable. It had been grey; now it turned black. His lips writhed back, exposing rotted yellow teeth. The flesh and cartilage about his nose began to shrivel away. The tightly-stretched skin over his cheeks split apart, exposing the bone beneath. Blood ran out of the corners of his eyes.

I remained speechless, unable to move, unable, even, to think. My eyes riveted themselves on the fearful spectacle before me. I could not turn them away.

Briefly he continued to stagger about, tearing at his throat. His eyes became tiny red points of light set in receding sockets. His nose seemed suddenly to be absorbed, leaving nothing but the ghastly nostril pits of a skull. His frightening yellow-tooth grimace became that of a corpse whose lips have fallen into decay.

He reeled, crashed against the table and fell to the floor. And as I watched, like the stone statue caught up in some sorcerer's spell, the entire flesh of his face flaked off; as his hands slid from his throat, their skin blackened and disappeared—they became the yellow, jointed hands of a skeleton. Even the white hairs detached themselves from his skull and drifted to the floor.

His clothes, which had already begun to disintegrate, changed into bits of rag which finally fell apart.

The yellowish skeleton bones turned brown and began to crumble. At the end there was nothing visible left on the floor except fragments of a skull, thigh bones and a few scattered teeth.

At last, while my mind continued to whirl in the near-grip of insanity, I gained my feet and rushed for the door. Like a mad thing myself, I ran down the steps and into the night.

As I reached the end of Cain Street I stopped and turned, though what impelled me to do so I shall never know. The brick house of Thaddeus Woolson was already spouting flames. Far back in my feverish brain I understood what had happened: in my sudden flight I had knocked over the candle; rampaging wind, rushing through the open door, had quickly fanned a small fire into a growing conflagration which was consuming the entire house.

I ran on and on through the night. When I finally reached my lodgings, I collapsed and remained dangerously ill for days. My old-fashioned doctor said I suffered from "brain fever brought on by some sudden shock." He never inquired what that shock was and I never volunteered to enlighten him.

I learned later that Thaddeus Woolson's house had been completely gutted. Since it was scheduled to be demolished the very next day, no attempt was made to put out the fire. Only the blackened brick walls were left standing and these soon came down.

They never found the bone fragments in the ruins. And since no one had seen me leave the house, there the matter rests.

If any inquiry was made concerning the whereabouts of Thaddeus Woolson, I never learned of it.

I like to think that, removed forever from the mundane march of events, his shade is still prowling the streets of some old city lost in time.

Killer Cat

IT HAD occurred to him quite suddenly and he had acted on the impulse before there was time to ponder the matter.

He had the little paper open and was slipping the barbitol powder into a glass when the idea first came to him. For a half minute he just stood there while his heart beat faster. Then he dumped in three more of the powders and walked to the bedroom where his Aunt Martha lay softly moaning. She swallowed the drug without even opening her eyes and one hour later she was dead. It was as simple as that.

Dr. Myerbron assured him that her heart had given out, showed no surprise and even hinted that he had expected her demise long before.

Dennis Stonegate was no calloused murderer. Far from it. After the funeral when he had finally moved into his aunt's house for good, he assured himself on that point.

He had, he told himself, acted through mercy. His aunt was suffering; Dr. Myerbron had tacitly admitted more than once that she would not recover; and certainly a few weeks or even months could make little difference to the semi-conscious invalid. Better to relieve her of suffering rather than permit her to linger and perhaps undergo worse tortures later on when her last powers of resistance were spent.

He repeated this to himself so often he finally came to believe it. But secretly he knew otherwise. Some small insistent chamber in his brain kept whispering the truth. The truth was he had grown tired of waiting.

At first all seemed to go well. Now that he was relieved of a certain measure of responsibility, he began to enjoy life. Of course, for a time, he had to put on a sober countenance when he left the house in the morning. And he had to act properly subdued on certain occasions. But that was easy enough. He even prided himself a little on his acting ability. Sometimes he played the part so well he could feel himself becoming melancholy. And then he would laugh, struck by the irony of the situation. His Aunt Martha had never meant very much to him. She had merely been an obstacle to be removed.

The first time the cat annoyed him he dismissed the incident without further thought. It was a big black Persian with a silky plume of a tail and luminous yellow eyes and it had been his aunt's favorite pet for years.

One night after he had mashed some sardines in its dish, he became irritated when, instead of running up to eat, it drew back and spit at him. But he merely shrugged and went back to the paper.

The next day it again refused to eat. He speculated, idly, assumed that it was undergoing, a disorder, or distemper, or whatever it was that cats undergo, and forgot the matter.

A week or so later, however, the cat's actions began to annoy him. He remembered then that so far as he could recall it had eaten almost nothing he had set out for it since his aunt's death.

Even then, the affair did not really bother him much. It was just an irritant in the back of his mind.

Nevertheless, some time later he had an experience which

definitely upset him. There was certainly nothing very unusual about it—and he felt a little like a fool at times when he realized how he permitted the incident to prey on him.

He had gone to bed late and had had a vague but unpleasant dream. It seemed that he was lying somewhere in the darkness unable to move, pinned down by a deadly paralysis, a smothering weight. He awoke suddenly drenched with sweat and saw two yellow eyes staring into his own. For just a moment he was on the verge of a scream; then he remembered the cat and felt at once relieved and rather angry. The beast was lying flat on his chest and made no move until he swung his arms and swept it roughly to the floor. It sprang toward the door, turned once and scurried down the hall.

The next morning he laughed at himself. The cat had often slept on his aunt's bed and had happened to climb up on his for a cozy place to spend the night.

He felt uneasy though, when he recalled how wide-awake the cat had been when he opened his eyes.

For well over a week nothing further happened to upset him. The cat skulked out of sight most of the time.

Then he had an experience which thoroughly frightened him and he determined to get rid of his aunt's old pet.

Again he had a dream. Again he was in darkness. And this time he was being smothered. He was rigid, unable to stir, struggling to breathe, and there was no air to be had. He awoke as before, suddenly, cold with sweat, and felt his spine tingle when he realized that something soft and black was pressed firmly against his face. He sat up violently and groped wildly for the switch. Something plopped on the floor just as light flooded the room and then the cat paused at the door as before, turned its yellow eyes on him and disappeared.

He sat still for some minutes, while his head whirled. He was frightened and shocked at the things which he dared not admit to himself and now a determined rage took possession of him.

The next day did not shake his determination. He brooded about the cat and purposely planned his work so that he could leave early.

He let himself in quietly, entered the kitchen and picked up the iron poker, and then softly started down the cellar stairs. It was here the cat usually hid itself when it sensed his approach.

Pressing the light switch at the bottom, he quickly crossed toward the coal bins. He had left some wooden crates piled near a window in one of the bins and now in the light he saw the cat's yellow eyes shining behind the bottom slats.

Springing toward the crates, he swung the poker viciously. The bottom crate collapsed with a rending of brittle wood and the whole pile lurched off balance. As he stepped back to avoid being struck, the cat shot past.

Cursing, he started after it, but his foot caught on a crate and he fell headlong. He jumped up, white with rage, and rushed into the open cellar. Dust billowed out from the bin and he could not see the cat. He stood back, glaring around the cellar, and waited for the dust to settle. His foot felt hot however, and glancing down he was shocked to see his shoe wet with blood. A nail must have penetrated his ankle and cut a vein. Thoroughly unnerved now, he dropped the poker and hurried upstairs.

He bathed his foot, dressed it and at length sat back, weak with nervous exhaustion. But now he was more determined than ever. Before another day had passed he would kill the cat.

Although his foot grew sore, his wound was not really serious, and the next day he went to work as usual. A black mood seemed to settle on him however, and finally he found it impos-

sible to concentrate on the various details which required his attention. He felt that until the cat was destroyed, his peace of mind would never be regained.

Towards mid-day he complained of a violent headache, excused himself, and hurried homeward.

Making sure that all the windows were closed and all the doors locked, he began a slow and systematic search of the house. He started in the garret and worked downward.

By the time he descended to the cellar a half hour had passed and his patience was nearly exhausted. He poked through the coal bins, inwardly cursing the elusive beast, and then smashed each crate in turn to eliminate every possible hiding place.

As he mounted to the garret a second time some portion of his anger gave way to a feeling of faint but persistent dread. He was positive that the cat had been locked in the day before.

He began the search again, ferreting in every conceivable corner, overturning baskets, scouring the closets, even jabbing the poker in amongst his aunt's clothing hung in a dusty hall store-room.

Another hour passed before he gave up. He slumped in a chair, weary and possessed by a nameless fear, and tried to think. One moment he told himself he was a superstitious fool, and the next he pictured the cat as an incarnation of calculated evil and malice. He had heard stories of the dead entering the bodies of animals in order to wreak their unholy revenge. Tales of werewolves and vampires had haunted the race since the misty beginnings of recorded time. Why not a cat? Especially one that had been so closely allied to the dead? One that had, perhaps, with that strange insight sometimes possessed by high-bred animals, read his very thoughts?

He sprang up, cursing himself for a childish fool, and deter-

mined to put the entire matter out of his mind. He prepared a warm bath, soaked at leisure, refreshed himself with a highball and sat down to read the paper.

By evening his spirits had improved. He ate a light but well-selected dinner—since the death of his aunt he no longer denied himself expensive articles of food—left a note for the woman who would come to clean in the morning, and settled down to an evening of relaxation with his books.

As he read however, he again found his mind wandering. He glanced up sharply on a number of occasions, sure that he had seen a shadow move against the wall. Once he heard, or imagined he heard, a cry just outside the window. It sounded like the wail of a cat, but there was an unearthly note mixed in it which lifted the hairs on the nape of his neck. He sat rigid, bathed with perspiration, and waited for the cry to be repeated, but the silence flowed on and at last he lay back in his chair, weak with the strain of expectation. He told himself that his nerves were on edge; certainly there was no reason to become upset about a cat prowling outside. Cats prowled, especially at night. Why, what a fool he had become!

He stirred from his chair, mixed himself a stiff drink, and resumed his book, riveting his attention on every page. He was congratulating himself on his success when chancing to glance up to momentarily rest his eyes, he was terrified to see a shape of darkness dart quickly away from the window.

For a second he sat frozen in his chair; then he hurled down the book, rushed to the door and literally flung himself outside.

The long lawn in front of the house lay bathed in soft moonlight and not even a wind rustled the maple leaves. The lawn and the stone walk and the garden space against the house were entirely empty. Not a shadow was out of place.

He stood a long time, pondering, listening, peering into the misty veil of moonlight. Once a moth swooped into the light, causing him an inordinate fright. At last he closed the door.

He assured himself again that his nerves were on edge; he did not feel too well. He was beginning to imagine things. There was really nothing to be afraid of—certainly not of a mere cat! Perhaps he needed a vacation, a trip to the mountains, a change of scenery.

He continued to reason with himself, meanwhile occupying himself with various tasks about the house. At length, after a careful scrutiny of every dark corner, he retreated to his room, bolted the door, looked under the bed and made a detailed inspection of the mesh screen on his window. It appeared quite substantial—certainly no cat could ever penetrate it.

Soothed by weariness and the elaborate precautions which he had observed, he at last slid into bed and switched off the light.

He was asleep within a half hour and for some time slept soundly. Then he began to dream. It appeared that he was hiding somewhere when a shadowy shape of evil, an indefinable manifestation of overpowering hate, appeared suddenly on the scene and immediately sought out his hiding place, glaring down at him with baleful yellow eyes. He awoke with a scream, sat up in bed, half turned toward the window—and found himself staring straight into the luminous yellow eyes of the cat.

The beast did not offer to move. It squatted on the window ledge and fixed its eyes on his own with unmoving intensity. For a long moment he sat paralyzed with horror. The beast hated him; it had waited until he was asleep, helpless, and only the wire screen had kept it from the room. He shuddered when he thought what might have happened.

At length he managed to switch on the light, but the cat did

not move an inch. It crouched motionless on the sill outside, watching him with cold hate in its tawny eyes.

He began to dress, slowly, keeping one eye on the cat. Further sleep would be impossible.

When he had dressed, slipped on a warm jacket and regained full possession of his faculties, his courage began to assert itself. He searched the room for a weapon, finally selecting a knotty laurel-wood cane.

The cat remained on the window ledge, watching his every move.

Taking a firm grip on the cane, he slid the bolt and stepped into the outer hall. It did not appear at all fantastic to him that he should dress in the middle of the night, arm himself, and creep outside to destroy a cat.

He unlatched the rear door, slipped quickly outside, and made a run for his bedroom window.

The cat leaped off the sill an instant ahead of his arrival, dodged the downward sweep of the cane and ran toward the open field in the rear of the house.

He cursed, regained his balance and whirled after it.

A low mist had risen over the meadow; it was like a curtain of grey-white shadow in the moonlight. Momentarily he lost sight of the beast; then he glimpsed it again, bellying its way slowly through the wet grass. It crawled with a queer dragging of its hindquarters, as if it had been injured, and frequently it looked back.

He took a firmer grip on the cane and rushed forward with a feeling of exultation. His first swing of the cane must have struck it after all. He would catch it now. He would be upon it in an instant. The sneaking, murderous black devil—he'd pound it to a pulp. Ah, now he had it!

He swung the heavy cane with all his strength. The cat leaped nimbly aside, ran a few yards, then stopped and turned its head, fixing its eerie yellow eyes on him.

The sweep of his arm had caused him to lose his balance and now as he lunged in pursuit again he lost his footing entirely; his feet shot sideways on the slippery grass and he crashed to the ground.

He was up in an instant, cursing, frantic with rage, and sprang toward the motionless cat.

The animal waited until he was almost upon it, then quickly dodged aside and ran in another direction.

He was out of breath now, but it never occurred to him to abandon the chase. He rushed after the hated black beast which ran ever ahead of him in the swirling mist, now scarcely crawling, now darting out of reach with the suddenness of a whip-lash, now pausing and turning its flat head to make sure he was following behind.

He leaped forward like a madman, striking out savagely with the cane, sliding to his hands and knees, a wild frenzied figure in the moonlight. He was possessed by the one idea; he had lost all sense of proportion, of direction; he did not even know into which part of the meadow he had ventured.

Suddenly the cat made a long leap. It landed heavily and appeared to go limp. It looked back but did not move as he lunged forward.

Without warning the ground vanished beneath his feet and he plunged downward like a stone. Even as he fell he understood the trap to which he had been led. With demoniac cunning, the cat had caused him to run directly over the shaft of a deep abandoned well which was located in the rear unused portion of the meadow.

He screamed once before the black water closed over his head, sending him straight down a pool of freezing darkness. He kicked and clawed and at last came to the surface, but already the icy water was working its paralysis in him.

He stared up and screamed again, but the steep walls of the well smothered his cry; it was little more than a weak moan above the surface of the ground.

As his wildly clutching fingers scraped in vain against the smooth moss-slick sides of the well, he looked up with a last desperate hope and there silhouetted above him, like a fiend from hell, was the remorseless shape of the cat, gazing steadily downward with a glow of triumph in its yellow eyes.

He started to scream again, but his fingers lost their frail grip on the mossy stones and he sank out of sight beneath the surface of green scum.

In the Very Stones

"It is inconceivable to me," wrote my psychic-investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, "that any person of reasonable perception and sensitivity could pass a long period of his life in a specific habitation without leaving something of himself, impregnated as it were, in the very stones, wood and mortar of the place."

How vividly I recalled this statement later on! But let me start at the beginning.

I had been away from New Haven for many years and I returned in a rather weary mood of reminiscence and regret. My health was not good. The rheumatic fever of my childhood had finally damaged my heart. In addition, I was having eye trouble. The optic nerves were unaccountably inflamed; strong light was painful to me. In dim or subdued light, however, I could see remarkably well, so well in fact that I began to feel that my vision was becoming abnormal.

After engaging a room in one of the few remaining residential areas of the city which had not been engulfed in the spreading contagion of human and social degeneration, I began to take long, rambling walks about the town. I usually waited for a day when the sun was hidden; when the sky was overcast and the light was grey rather than gold, my eyes stopped throbbing and I could stroll in relative peace.

The city had changed remarkably. At times I scarcely knew where I was. Acres of familiar buildings had been swept away. Remembered streets had vanished. Great new structures, efficient but ugly, rose on every side. New highways looped and slashed in every direction. In bewilderment I frequently retreated to the still unseized central Common, or Green as it is called. I understood, however, that even this last leafy refuge was under siege; various interests were agitating to cover the grass with cement in order to create a gigantic pay-toll parking lot.

One afternoon in late October when a threat of rain hung in the air, I started out on a walk. The lack of sun rested my eyes; the chill air somehow soothed me. For an hour or so I strolled aimlessly. On a sudden whim I decided to visit a city area which I had so far neglected. I had lived in this section as a very young child—over forty years ago. Although I was scarcely more than three when the family moved, I retained vivid memories of the neighborhood and of the specific house itself.

The house was a two-story, red-brick structure, solidly built, located at 1248 State Street. When I lived there, a big elm tree stood in front of the house. In the rear, a large empty lot which stretched to the adjacent street, Cedar Hill Avenue, made an ideal playground. Subsequently the elm tree was cut down, the lot was nearly filled by a cheap tenement-type building and the entire neighborhood declined.

As I approached the old area, I was appalled at the appearance of things. Some houses had been torn down; others stood vacant, displaying smashed windows, broken doors and collapsed verandas. On one block every house was empty and partially wrecked. I was amazed and disconcerted. I had not seen such desolation since war days.

Under those grey October skies, with a thin mist already start-

ing to fall, it was the bleakest scene imaginable. I experienced an intense oppression of spirits, and as I continued to walk along those strangely deserted streets, my mood of dejection only deepened.

I finally met a pedestrian, muffled already in a winter overcoat. He squinted at me suspiciously when I asked him why so many of the houses stood smashed and empty. "Route 91," he muttered, hurrying away.

Although I had learned there was indeed a rational explanation for the devastation. I felt no better. I was firmly convinced that a slight alteration on the highway blueprints could have carried the new road across empty marsh flats, only a few miles away. The cost of fill would have been a fraction of that expended on extensive condemnation proceedings.

I fully expected that the brick house of my early childhood lay already in ruins. I felt a thin exultation at finding it still standing. I say "thin" because of course I knew it was doomed. Already its windows were broken, its door sagged in and part of its front hedge had been ground away by truck or bulldozer.

As I stood regarding it, remembering clearly episodes of over forty years past, I reflected on the rootlessness which marks the average city denizen. By choice, or more likely necessity, he moves from one house to another. He has no anchor, nothing of continuity. When he visits his old neighborhood, he may find that his former house has vanished. The site of it may be occupied by a city-supported "project" for permanent welfare cases, or by a cinder-block garage, or by a barren parking lot. The house, the trees, the back yard, the very curbstones and sidewalks may be gone.

The returner will experience a haunting sense of loss, a sense of bewilderment, of chaos. He may finally begin to feel that he is even losing his own identity, that, in fact, he has no identity.

He will feel lost in time, without either a future or a past. There will be nothing he can go back to and nothing of permanence that he can foresee in an uncertain future.

Isolated, fugacious, essentially a drifter, he will experience a loneliness of spirit which nothing can assuage. Thousands of his kind inhabit the modern city, gnawed by a sense of their own rootlessness, hungering in vain for a home, a habitation which partakes of the flavor of time, a continuing and cherished spot of earth which links their own past with some kind of hopeful future.

With these depressing thoughts in mind, I stood before the lost red brick house of my childhood. I had an impulse to enter, but I supposed it was unsafe and very probably forbidden.

Dusk fell; the mist grew heavier; and still I lingered in that area. Moving away from the doomed house I had known, I wandered along those desolate streets, peering through cracked windows, through sagging doors which never again would open to a friendly hand.

In some windows, frayed, blackened curtains, left hanging in the confusion of forced removal, fluttered in the cold October wind. Odd bits of broken furniture, dishes and ornaments lay scattered about. Entire lifetimes had been passed in some of these houses; now they stood as empty shells, awaiting absolute and final destruction.

The entire area seemed deserted, silent, drained of all life. Even the usual city noises were strangely muffled and distant.

I roamed restlessly, numbed by the desolation which surrounded me, yet perversely unwilling to leave. The mist thickened and full darkness fell and I remained.

In spite of the darkness I could see remarkably well. I linked this abnormal ability with my eyes' unusual sensitivity to strong

light; I felt that both conditions stemmed from the inflamed state of the optic nerves, an affliction I have already mentioned.

I passed an alley, glittering strangely with bits of scattered window glass, and stood surveying an adjacent house which leaned crazily with a collapsed roof. It was a small white frame house, inexpensively built, and yet I saw that someone had once tended it carefully. The paint was bright; the little mailbox looked as if it had been scrubbed; and the trampled remains of a once-neat garden surrounded the place.

As, musing, I stared at this wrecked house through the growing mist, I saw a face at one of the two front ground-floor windows. It was the face of an old man, white, mournful, filled with an ineffable desolation.

I gazed at it in astonishment. My first thought was that an elderly vagrant had crept into the wreckage of the white house in order to pass the night. The dampness, probably, made his old bones ache.

The face continued to look out at me; I walked away with some uneasiness. I shivered, blaming it on the cold mist.

I had gone less than a half block when I saw the woman. Enormously fat, she sat in a wicker chair on the half-demolished veranda of a two-story house. She wore very thick-lensed glasses which seemed to reflect light from some hidden source. There was no moon, certainly, and I saw no artificial lights nearby.

I was startled, but I supposed that a few people must still be clinging illegally to old homes in the area, pending final arrangements for the occupancy of a new residence.

Some impulse urged me to hurry past, to move straight ahead without looking aside. Stubbornly, however, and against my own best judgement, I refused.

Instead, I paused, cleared my throat and spoke. "Good evening," I said.

The fat woman did not reply; she did not seem to have heard me. Possibly, I reasoned, in addition to having weak eyes, she was also hard of hearing.

I moved a few steps up the front walk and nodded. "Good evening," I repeated, loudly.

Then I blinked in astonishment. The wicker chair was empty! I stopped dead and stared at it. Momentarily I had glanced down at the walk to make sure that I would not stumble over debris; in those scant seconds the fat woman must have vacated her chair and slipped inside.

I marveled. For one of her bulk, she moved with amazing agility. Turning, I went back to the sidewalk and started on. I supposed that the woman was self-conscious about her continued occupancy of the condemned house and had gone inside to avoid any necessity of discussing it with a stranger.

As I walked away, I glanced back. Once again I saw light glitter on those thick-lensed glasses; the fat woman was back in her wicker chair.

Something more than the swirling mist made me shudder. Frowning, I hurried on. It was late, I told myself, and I had better leave these ruined, mist-shrouded streets and go home to a good cup of hot tea.

I walked rapidly, but I could not resist looking at the vacant houses I passed.

Suddenly I stopped. My heart began pounding. An icy gush of fear made my scalp tingle. Wide-eyed, mouth agape, I gazed through that tenuous wall of mist and felt that reason and sanity were leaving me.

Nearly half of those smashed and deserted houses all at once were occupied. I saw pale sad faces peering from a dozen differ-

ent windows. Dim, mist-circled figures sat on some of the porches. An old man, twisted with some arthritic malady, worked feebly in a tiny front garden. A middle-aged woman, white as death, but with a kind of hopeless fury stamped on her face, stood glaring near a broken gate.

Worse than these were other sights. I saw a rocker moving to-and-fro on a porch, although there was no one in it. I saw a claw-like hand, tapering to a vague sleeve which in turn raveled away to nothingness, clutching the brick side of a building. In the rear garden of a half-destroyed house I glimpsed what appeared to be the disembodied head of a woman in a big straw hat drifting slowly above the matted tangle of a neglected flower plot.

I felt the clutch of near madness. I no longer had any faint desire to linger and look. Flight, immediate and imperative, became my only object.

I rushed wildly through those forsaken, yet-not-forsaken streets with fear like a hound at my heels. I ran till my heart thumped and dizziness overcame me. At last, away from that accursed area of peering white faces, of clinging mist and strange pregnant silence, I collapsed in a doorway.

Hours afterward I reached home and fell into bed. For days I was ill. My heart had been strained anew and in addition I manifested pleuritic symptoms. As I lay in bed, I brooded over my weird experience on that street of silent houses. I told myself that my eyes, inflamed and super-sensitive, had played tricks on me, that the drifting fog plus my own imagination had been at fault.

But weeks later when I related my adventure to my psychic-investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, he shook his head at my explanations.

"I am firmly convinced," he told me, "that neither your in-

flamed eyes nor your imagination conjured up the phantoms which you describe.

"As I wrote you recently, it is inconceivable to me that any person of reasonable perception and sensitivity could pass a long period of his life in a specific habitation without leaving something of himself, impregnated as it were, in the very stones, wood and mortar of the place.

"What you saw were the psychic residues of the poor vanished souls who, in the aggregate, had spent hundreds of years in those condemned houses. Their psychic remnants were still clinging to the only earthly anchors that remained, and already, as you relate, some of them had dwindled and faded to mere detached fragments."

He shook his head. "Poor souls!"

The House at 1248

IT WAS AN ordinary looking red brick house situated at 1248 State Street, New Haven, near the corner of Blatchley Avenue. Although simple in design and construction, it was not unattractive. It was strong and sturdy in appearance; its soot-stained bricks remained firmly mortised in place, uncracked and unloosened by decades of frost and rain. Its stone window supports gave it a further look of sturdiness.

I suppose it was built sometime before the turn of the century; I have never ascertained the exact date. I was brought to the house a few months after my birth in December, in 1918, in Bridgeport. My mother contracted influenza before I was born and I was not expected to live. In a literal sense, I was brought to the house to die. For weeks and months no other possibility seemed to exist.

But I survived. The sturdy brick house seemed to shield me; its brick walls and stone-secured windows kept in the warmth. The floors, at least on the second story which we occupied, always remained dry. The chimney drew well. There was ample ventilation whenever needed—windows all round. Even the attic, with its big unfinished timbers reaching up the slant roof, was a cozy, friendly place.

At night the soft glow of old-fashioned gas lights gave all the illumination required.

The house was my first fortress, the first home I knew, my earliest anchor on earth. What matter that I was not yet four when we moved? Those first formative years were stored within my memory for all time. Deep within my subconscious, the red brick house became a symbol of security, of refuge, a place which would forever be home, a site set apart, a first haven—and a last frantic hope.

My family moved, not because of any deficiency in the house itself, but because of an unpleasant situation concerned with new tenants who took over the first floor.

I was deeply disturbed, but childhood throws off these events, at least at the time. We moved into a frame house at 59 Bishop Street, which, in design and room arrangement, actually bore a resemblance to the old brick house. With the house went a large back yard, containing two cherry trees, a grape arbor, lilac bushes, a catalpa tree and expanses of deep grass. Here I was brought up, while nearly sixteen years sped past.

At length, reluctantly, we moved once more, again because of impossible neighbors. Tragedy and hard times swiftly engulfed us. My father died. The struggle to keep the remaining members of the family together under reasonable living conditions became a grim ordeal. There was little time to look into the past; the stark present and the ominous future consumed all energies, all imaginings.

And yet the old red brick house was never entirely forgotten. It was a comfortable if fleeting thought to know that it was still in existence, virtually unchanged by the speeding years. It remained an anchor, more psychic than physical perhaps, but reassuring nonetheless.

War came and I had to leave. Three years passed before I returned and then the family broke up. There were further

moves, crises, illnesses, problems. Through it all, exhausted though I might be, I tried to write. Little enough came of my efforts, but I persevered. I never gave up.

As the years merged, as I shifted from one uncomfortable apartment to another, harrassed by rent gougers, heat skimpers and neighbors who practiced on drums in adjacent rooms, the memory of the old house remained with me.

Something, however, held me from visiting it. I felt that the new occupants would be unfriendly. I would be stared at; I would be an object of curiosity. If I asked to be let inside, they would probably slam the door and call the police. Beyond this, I knew that the neighborhood in which it was located was swiftly deteriorating. The area was becoming infiltrated by those prolific products of our city slums who are notable for the two hobbies which they pursue with unswerving fidelity throughout their entire irresponsible lives. One is to collect welfare checks and the other is to mug and rob the tax-payers who support them.

More years passed. At length, on picking up the paper one rainy October afternoon, I was shocked to learn that the old brick house was doomed. A new highway was being prepared; it would slash through the city like a controlled tornado, leveling everything before it. And the old house lay directly in its path.

In a mood of great depression I walked through the wet streets toward the first home of my childhood. As I approached the old neighborhood, I was appalled at the changes which had taken place. Some houses were already wrecked and deserted; most of the others appeared to be occupied by a swarthy, boisterous lot who seemed to be literally tearing down the houses about their own heads.

My heart contracted when I rounded the corner of State Street

and came in sight of the old brick house. It was there as I remembered it, almost completely unchanged. If anything, amid the chaos which was engulfing it, the house looked sturdier than ever. I could see not a fissure, not a single cracked brick. Although no one was visible, the house appeared to be occupied.

Engulfed by memories, I stood on the sidewalk in the rain. Time seemed to cease; forty years slipped away, and once again I was a curly-haired moppet peering down from that upstairs kitchen window.

I turned away, finally, and retraced my steps through the rain-swept October streets. If only Time could be reversed I thought! Why were we doomed to be forever trapped in this inflexible dimension, trudging down a treadmill to oblivion, eternally unable to retrace a single step?

The cold streets and the grey October skies gave me no answer. Chilled and despondent, I reached my rooms at last and collapsed in a chair.

Less than a week later, however, I was prowling those dismal streets again, fearful that the old brick house had already disappeared. It still stood, and again I remained gazing at it for long minutes, while events I thought I had forgotten crowded in upon me.

The house became a magnet; scarcely a day passed that I did not pay it a visit. The weather made no difference to me. I went once when sheets of wind-driven rain limited visibility to a few feet. The house grew to an obsession which strengthened as it fed upon itself.

One freezing day in November I arrived to find the house deserted; a "Condemned" notice was nailed to the front door. The house was to be demolished, the notice stated; meanwhile, trespassing was forbidden; violaters would be subject to arrest.

In spite of the risk involved, I had an irresistible impulse to enter the rooms of my childhood one last time. Traffic moving along the street was fairly heavy, and I hesitated. At length I walked around the house to the rear and tried the back door. It was unlocked; entering the dim hallway, I waited a moment, listening, while my eyes adjusted to the shadowy interior. There was complete silence, the absolute overwhelming silence of vanished time. I climbed the curving, darkened stairs, pushed open another door and found myself in the beloved and familiar rooms of my childhood.

The rooms were as I remembered them; the only major difference was the substitution of electric lights for gas fixtures. Although a few odds and ends lay strewn about, the rooms were clean and by no means neglected. Fresh paint and wallpaper had been applied in the not distant past.

As I walked through the kitchen, the living room and the two bedrooms, a feeling of indescribable eeriness overcame me. Incidents I had not recalled in forty years returned to haunt me. In those freezing rooms, lighted now only by grey November skies, the past rose up and lived again.

I stood at the kitchen window where as a child I had watched for my father to appear in the evening. He would glance up, smile and wave, and I would bound toward the front door, prepared to fling myself upon him. As I think back now, I know that he must often have been exhausted, depressed and worried, but in those magic days he was, to me, an unfailing refuge. No matter what his problems, I was not put aside.

He would never appear again, look up and wave, never for all time, though I stood at that window while the decades and the centuries passed, though I stood for all eternity. And yet . . . My mind told me one thing, but some psychic, intuitive element

within me whispered otherwise. Was it possible that past time might still exist? That time itself was a dimension which might be invaded?

Shivering, desolate, confronted by the loneliness of years, by the isolation which time imposes, I remained pondering those questions which my poor brain could not clearly comprehend. A barrier had been imposed, a barrier of psychic force which we were never meant to penetrate, at least not while we still lived . . .

Finally I turned from the cold, empty and enigmatic rooms of my childhood and made my way down the darkened stairs to the street. The dreary present, with its thousand irritations, immersed me once again, but I went on listening for the dark flowing river of the past, part of it channeled through me, rushing on its predetermined course forever.

I could not put the old brick house out of mind. I visited it daily; I stood listening to the silence in those icy rooms, while more and more incidents, forgotten for forty years, came to mind again. I roamed from room to room, searching for links to the past, scrutinizing every door and window, every closet, every inch of floor and wall. Once, in the eerie silence, a door somewhere below began to bang as the wind struck it. It was the only sound I ever heard in the house, a mournful refrain which somehow only accentuated the deeper prevailing silence.

Houses on all sides were swiftly falling before the wrecker's sledges. Apparently my old house was being saved till last; I could almost believe that I was being deliberately tantalized. No one challenged me in my visits to the house; it had been consigned to oblivion and it appeared that the "No Trespassing" warning was posted for various legal reasons and was not enforced.

I began to feel that an affinity was building up between the

house and myself. On the surface this was absurd, but I could not free myself of the conviction that the house was far more than a mass of bricks, stone and mortar. Residues of the past clung to it, impregnated it, as it were; it was these that I groped for, down the long crumbling corridors of time.

I cannot tell, now, how many hours I spent in those rooms—it must have been hundreds. November became December; snow fell and frigid winds blew along the streets and still I returned. More and more I relived the past; I remembered minor incidents, daily routines, in minute detail. One recollection led to another; a chain reaction was created and I was finally capable of something approaching "total recall." The past became the reality; now it was the present which became misty and blurred.

One dark day in late December—I cannot recall the precise date—I walked once more through the cold and nearly deserted streets toward the house of my childhood. Snow was starting to fall; sounds came to my ears muffled and hushed as from an infinite distance. People passed like ghosts, obscured by the flakes.

As I approached the old brick house, complete silence prevailed. My own footsteps, cushioned by the snow, made no sound at all.

Walking to the rear, I pushed open the back door and started up the stairs. Halfway up, I noticed that some change had taken place. I realized suddenly that the stairs had been recently swept and scrubbed. I could even smell a fresh soapy odor. Puzzling, I pushed open the door at the head of the stairs and entered the rooms of my childhood.

I stopped, stood motionless, bewildered. The rooms were now completely furnished. Chairs, tables, a stove, rugs, were set in exact order. Pictures and calendars were centered on the walls. Gaslight cast a soft glow over the scene.

With my heart pounding and something stirring the roots of my hair, I assured myself that there had been some change in the highway plans. The route had been altered; the house was being spared and someone had already moved back in. Probably electricity had not yet been restoerd; the old gas fixtures, perhaps left connected by accident, had been brought into temporary service.

I kept repeating to myself that this must be the case. But this explanation could not account for the weird sense of familiarity which I experienced. How was it possible that I remembered the pictures on the walls, the colors of the rugs, the very pattern of the kitchen linoleum? How could I know that there would be a big wooden box of toys on the other side of the kitchen, near the window, when from where I stood the box was completely hidden by a table? Fear vied with a strange sense of exultation as I crossed the kitchen, noted the toy box, and then looked into the other rooms. I did not feel like an intruder; everything was as I remembered.

Was it all a trick? Had someone furnished the apartment as I recalled it, in a deliberate attempt to confound me? No, that was impossible.

Even as the explanation which I was afraid to face kept forcing itself upon me, I was aware of a subtle but unmistakable sense of oppression. I felt that I was laboring under some kind of pressure, a pressure which was increasing, a pressure which might even become lethal.

Shaking my head as if to clear it of cobwebs, I walked to the kitchen window which fronted on State Street. Looking out, I saw no snow at all. Yellow maple leaves were blowing along the sidewalk, stirred by a brisk wind. I stared down, terribly frightened by the sight of those tumbling yellow leaves. A clock

ticked on a shelf in the kitchen; glancing up, I saw that it was almost five-thirty.

My gaze returned to the window again. Why was it important that I stand there and watch, I asked myself? What was I watching for? Who—

And then my father, wearing a familiar grey overcoat, and dead now for twenty-five years, came walking along the sidewalk. Looking up, he smiled and waved. A moment later he was lost to view as he turned in toward the front steps.

I heard the street door open and close. I heard beloved, familiar footsteps on the stairs—the slow, firm and measured tread which I knew so well.

I wanted to rush to the door, but an urgent warning, out of the very depths of my psychic being, filled me with sudden terror. I could not reason it away, nor explain it, nor describe it—but I *knew*, down to the very last fiber of my being, that I must leave the room and the house immediately. Once that kitchen door opened, I was lost.

How can I explain that in spite of the fear, I left with anguish, with ineffable regret? As footsteps approached the top of the stairs, I whirled, raced to the rear door, plunged down the stairs and out into a wild, vertiginous night of darkness and whirling snow. Reality blends with delirium and memory does not separate the two. I cannot recall where I went nor what I did. I was found on the streets, in a state of exhaustion and shock, and carried home.

"Hallucination," they said. "A loss of contact with reality." "Wish fulfillment carried to a psychotic level." "A retrogressive fantasy." And so forth.

You who read this may form your own conclusions. Mine are formed and they will not be qualified.

I believe that my intense visualizations of the past, my detailed and prolonged recollection of early events, combined, perhaps, with that peculiar aura of timelessness which is brought on by falling snow, actually resurrected, or at least made manifest to my own awareness, a vanished period of my earlier life.

I am convinced that, however briefly, I moved on another plane of the time continuum. To have remained might have resulted in my annihilation; I shall never know. But I do know now what I have always believed: time is a dimension; it cannot be destroyed; it exists forever.

Somewhere the old brick house at 1248 is standing yet. A familiar tread sounds on the stairs and a frail but lively child flings himself once again toward an opening door. . . .

Black Thing at Midnight

JENKINS, janitor or "building superintendent" as he called himself, at Seabreeze Manor, stepped onto the deserted veranda of the now empty structure and looked up at the autumn sky. It was gray and unpromising.

For a minute or two he remained staring out at the choppy sea. A cold wind whined through the salty dune grass. The rhythmic grate of a rising tide growled along the desolate beaches.

Shaking his head, Jenkins went back inside. Every year he hated his lonely vigil a little bit more. It was his duty to remain until the power was shut off; then he had to lock up the building for the winter. Meanwhile, he was supposed to sweep out the rooms and set things in order. In the spring, Mr. Pastorfield, the proprietor, liked to come back to an orderly guest house.

After sweeping out the lobby in a desultory fashion, Jenkins went back onto the veranda. He was depressed and restless; they were closing earlier this year, and already the empty building was getting on his nerves. It was cold and bleak enough out on the open veranda, but it was better, he thought, than staying alone inside.

Three sooty gallinules flew out of the dune grass and disap-

peared over adjacent marshes. Jenkins watched until they were out of sight.

Looking down the long abandoned beach, he noticed a jumbled pile of tarpaper, tin, and timbers which marked the site of the old beachcomber's shack.

What was the old cuss's name? Felton? Felman? Fallon! That was it. Old man Fallon. A queer devil, Jenkins mused, with his bony yellow face and huge hands.

Since his disappearance, an ugly rumor had got around. They whispered that after his tarpaper shack collapsed in a severe storm, he had staggered up the beach near midnight, seeking succor at Seabreeze Manor. Mr. Pastorfield, it was said, had refused to admit him. Subsequently, he had wandered away down the dunes and disappeared. It was believed that, stumbling too close to the great crashing breakers which pounded the shore that night, he had been pulled out to sea and drowned.

Jenkins shrugged. Well, it was nothing to him. Mr. Pastorfield had been within his rights, legally, at least. Besides, old Fallon might have been drunk, and he had a nasty temper when he was soused.

A rising wind from the sea cut through Jenkins' thin summer suit. Shivering, he went back inside.

As he walked into the lobby, he saw with surprise that it was already beginning to get dark. Then he noticed that the desk light was off; ordinarily, it was left on all the time.

Frowning, he strode over and pulled the chain. Nothing happened. "Must be the bulb," he muttered to himself. On second thought, however, he hurried behind the desk and flipped the switch which would turn on the big overhead lights. Again nothing happened.

A sudden twinge of apprehension coursed through him. Had

the electric company shut off the power without letting him know?

Striding to the telephone, he dialed the company number. The telephone remained silent; it, too, had apparently been disconnected.

Exasperation, abetted by the stirring of a small panic, possessed Jenkins. Cursing the utility companies, he glanced at his watch. Too late. The last bus from Harmony Corners left at three-thirty; it was almost that time now. He knew that he could never walk the two miles in time, and there was no other transportation available.

Somehow, the electric company and the telephone company had received the wrong instructions—or misinterpreted the instructions they did receive. Or perhaps Mr. Pastorfield had been seen leaving early that morning. That would have been their cue to disconnect. It was just like a small resort town; word of mouth, casual assumptions, and a cut-off without any final check.

"And did you see Mr. Pastorfield leavin' this mornin'?"

"Oh, he left did he? I must tell Eddie, my nephew. Eddie works at the power plant. They'll want to shut off the electricity at the manor, you know. One year Mr. Pastorfield forgot to call in."

And so it went. Jenkins hated the whole meddling, muddling crew of them. Now he'd have to spend the night in a darkened building, without a telephone or any other means of communication.

He'd be cut off completely until the first bus reached Harmony Corners at ten the next morning. And of course he'd walk there to meet it.

Grumbling, he went into the kitchen and fixed himself a cold

cheese sandwich and a glass of milk, instead of the good hot soup he'd planned on having. Finished, he groped his way up the stairs to his room.

The wind was still rising. Waves were now striking the beach with an ominous roar. It would be a wild night.

Darkness pressed in swiftly. He lay on his bed, wide-awake, and listened to the storm's accelerating fury. The wind moaned and whined about the hotel; the building was besieged by buffeting gusts.

Dozing briefly, he awoke suddenly to the scream of near-hurricane winds and a thudding, tumultuous sea which threatened to sweep over the beaches into the corridors and rooms of the hotel itself.

Hurrying to the window, he found that he could see nothing. Rain sprayed against the panes as if someone were dousing the window with a high-powered hose.

Frowning, he sat down near the bed. Well, there was little or nothing he could do, he reflected somberly. If he felt the building going, he'd make a run for it; otherwise, he'd just sit it out. He could never get back to town in such a storm; if he didn't drown, he'd likely die of exhaustion.

Hours passed while the wind roared and great leaping walls of water pummeled the shoreline. Occasionally Jenkins drowsed, only to awaken abruptly with a start.

Towards midnight the storm began to subside. The wind died away; the crashing of waves dwindled into the routine sliding of surf.

For some reason, Jenkins found the sudden relative silence disturbing. It was disconcerting, eerie. He found himself listening to every slight sound.

He was just beginning to relax when he heard a muffled *thud*

somewhere below stairs. He sat up straight; his heart began to pound. *Thud*. There it was again. It sounded like—*Thud*. Yes, there was no sense in denying it. The thumps resembled the sound of heavy footfalls on the hotel's front veranda steps. He went on listening, motionless, as they continued across the veranda toward the door.

Jenkins knew that the door was locked and now he hoped that the midnight visitor, finding the building bolted, would depart.

The door rattled and shook as if someone were vigorously tugging at the handle. There was a rather long pause; Jenkins waited, hoping that those ominous footsteps—for such they must be—would thud down the steps and off into the night.

He could not understand the cocoon of fear which was casting itself about him. It was illogical, childish. Along with it went a disturbing sense of guilt. Probably some unfortunate had been caught in the storm and was now rather desperately seeking shelter. Possibly the late guest was ill or injured. Why, then, did he sit listening with hammering heart instead of hurrying down to unfasten the door?

As he hesitated, trying to come to some decision, the solution to his dilemma was suddenly and dramatically forced upon him.

The hotel's entrance door crashed inward with a great screeching and groaning of hinges, a splintering of panels which sounded like rifle shots.

A cold draft of air, laden with the odors of the sea, swept up the stairs.

Jenkins's impulse was to flee—to dash out of his room, down the rear stairs and into the night—but a rush of unreasoning terror locked him in its grip. He was unable to move.

As in a familiar nightmare he heard those fearful footsteps

clump across the lobby toward the stairs. There was something unnatural about the sound of them—something that stirred the faded hairs on the back of his neck.

There was another pause as they reached the bottom of the stairwell. Jenkins had just managed to move when they began their slow but inexorable ascent.

He froze again, paralyzed with an icy dread which all his rationalizing could not dissolve.

The footsteps were two-thirds of the way up before he managed to lurch across the room and lock the door. He waited, breathing heavily, as they reached the top.

As he listened, imbued with a terror he could not fathom, there came a clumsy shuffle down the corridor. He heard a door flung open, heard it smash against the wall. A brief pause and then the crash of another door. Two more and it would be his turn.

He edged toward a window as the third door was hurled open. *Crash!* That would be the one next to his. He began opening the window. Better chance death on the ground below than deliverance into the hands of whatever maniac intruder was prowling that hall! He was sure, now, that it was no mere refugee from the storm.

He had the window open and one leg raised toward the sill when his own door burst inward.

The thing that swayed in the open doorway surpassed his wildest fears. It resembled a corpse that had lain for a long time at the bottom of the sea. It was covered with black slime and bits of gray seaweed, and its entire face appeared to have been clawed or bitten away. Yet it was filled with a fierce questing animation and about the black pitted eye-sockets there shown a phosphorescent glow.

For one awful, endless half-minute Jenkins remained motionless, held in the grip of mind-searing fear which deadened every muscle. And that final pause was fatal.

Opening its puckered shapeless half-mouth in a gurgling squeal of rage, the black thing leaped across the room and caught him before he could get through the window. Its huge hands, more bone than flesh, closed upon him.

It was said, later, that his screams could be heard far past Harmony Corners, almost to the edge of town.

The local police, baffled and inwardly outraged, retreated behind such statements as "murder during the course of a robbery attempt" and "possibly the work of an escaped mental patient."

But nothing was stolen from the hotel and even Jenkins's wallet was found unrifled in his shredded clothing. And there was no report of an escaped mental patient addicted to violence.

Both the coroner and the police glossed over the condition of poor Jenkins's remains. "He looked," said one of the investigators to a private friend, "as if he'd been flayed, and his whole face was gone, torn into bloody ribbons."

When someone in town pointed out that Old Man Fallon, the beachcomber, had disappeared during a storm exactly one year previous to Jenkins's abrupt and horrible departure, there was sudden silence and later a furtive reaching for whiskey or aspirin bottles.

The murder, of course, was never solved.

Monton

I MET Monton when we were both still in high school. Later, as editor of a small local magazine, he published some of my early work. We became good friends; for some years he made sure that he never lost touch with me.

Paul Monton was a tall, rangy lad with a rather angular but not unattractive face. He was always smiling, ebullient, brimming with self-confidence. He was sure that he would be a famous literary figure by the time he was thirty.

Unfortunately, his early confidence was anchored more in the energy and enthusiasm of youth than in the solid ground of actual talent. His confidence was not enough; he simply lacked ability.

As the years ground on—including the grim years of the Great Depression—Monton fared badly. Although he did possess some limited editorial competence, his own writing was atrocious and no newspaper or magazine would put up with him for more than a few weeks.

He drifted into display advertising, door-to-door selling, retail store clerking and, finally, hard manual labor in a warehouse.

Through all this descending spiral, however, he never completely lost track of me. A post card or brief letter would arrive

every few months. At long intervals he would pay me a visit. In spite of his own failure, he seemed genuinely pleased at my own occasional success with a poem or a short story. It puzzled me, but I suppose there was really no mystery about it. Since he had published some of my very early work, I believe he experienced a sort of vicarious satisfaction at my modest success.

I treated him with kindness, with never a hint of condescension. But he did depress me. His smile grew forced, his ebullience synthetic. Self-confidence had been drained out of him by dreary jobs, petty bosses and dingy surroundings.

It was all rather tragic, I thought, but there were so many worse tragedies reported by the news media of the time that I knew there were people who envied even Monton.

As the Depression tapered off and we entered the war years, Monton's fortunes seemed to take a slight upward turn. He became a teller in one of the local banks which had survived "the crash" without having to close its doors. I doubt that he earned more in the bank than he had previously earned in the warehouse, but at least it was lighter work and it gave him a tenuous aura of prestige.

At about this time I found myself on a troop train heading for an army camp in Tennessee and for over three years I had no word from Monton.

Some time after my discharge from the service, I met him on the street. Although he had been rejected by the armed forces because of some obscure physical disability, he had grown plump. He wore flashy clothes; one finger held a massive diamond ring.

He greeted me with gusto. "My day off!" he exclaimed. "Heading for the track! Why not join me?"

"The track?" I asked absently.

He laughed. "The horses! Don't you take a little flyer now and then?"

I shook my head. "Afraid not. I gamble enough as it is."

He looked interested. "You gamble?"

"Whenever I write a story I gamble. It may sell or it may not. If it doesn't, I've lost hours of time and quite a bit of honest energy."

He smiled with surprising friendliness. "Well, I know you're gambling with the odds in your favor then. I've seen most of your stuff and I know it's good."

I thanked him for the compliment, and after a few inconsequential remarks we went our separate ways.

I'd usually meet him, after that, once or twice a year. If he was working, he'd be dressed in a sober dark blue suit, sans diamond ring. But if I met him on his day off, he invariably wore a brightly-patterned sports jacket and a big diamond ring glittered on one finger. In these brief encounters, I gathered that his job was a sort of dead-end affair. He still visited the race tracks.

About a decade after our first post-war meeting, I nearly bumped into him one rainy afternoon. He seemed glad to see me. He stopped to talk in spite of the downpour. It was his day off, but I noticed that he was rather shabbily dressed and that his enormous diamond ring had vanished.

As we conversed, it became apparent that he was embittered about his bank job and that he had not been having much luck with the horses. Although he never mentioned it, it was quite obvious to me that his ring reposed in some pawnbroker's safe.

He ended the conversation reluctantly, trudging away through the rain with a dispirited air. I felt sorry for him, but I didn't see how I could alter the pattern of his bleak existence.

My own problems were multiplying and, like Monton, I was not getting any younger.

Nearly a year passed before I heard from him again. Unexpectedly, he wrote from a sparsely-settled area of northern Connecticut, explaining that he had inherited a farm house and a small competence from an uncle whom he had not seen since early childhood. He had quit his bank job and, by living frugally, hoped to manage without working again.

In spite of his sudden good fortune, it seemed evident to me that he was not happy. He virtually begged me to come up and stay with him for a few weeks. He assured me that I could have two rooms for my own use and that he would not interfere with my writing chores, if I chose to continue them while remaining as his guest.

Ordinarily I would have politely declined his invitation. I no longer felt very close to Monton. But I was terribly tired; my apartment neighbors were noisy; and my doctor had suggested a vacation. I wrote Monton that I would pay him a visit.

His farm house was situated in the township of Tunxis, which is somewhat north of the village of Juniper Hill. The approach to this area is not cheering at any season. After traversing a series of uphill roads which climb through dark hemlock woods, you enter a region of uncommon desolation. The land is high, barren and infertile. Unused pastures holding great, grey, lichen-covered boulders line the dusty roads. Wind stirs sibilantly through the matted brindle grass of the unmowed meadows. Beyond the fields, woods made up largely of evergreens, stand shadowy and silent. In some places, forbidding marshes, ringed with heavy growths of willows, stretch for miles.

By the time I reached Juniper Hill, I had acquired an ineffa-

ble but persistent mood of apprehension. I blamed it on the landscape, however, and still looked forward to a few weeks of blessed quiet.

I drove north from Juniper Hill on a narrow dirt road which wound past cattail swamps, stands of spruce and empty stone-littered fields. It was still late summer but already a premonition of autumn seemed to imbue the air.

Late in the afternoon, as I rounded a curve in the skimpy track, Monton's farm home came into view. It was an old clap-boarded saltbox set back some distance from the road. The house bore a new coat of white paint and appeared to be in good condition.

As I drove into the entrance-way, Monton came out the front door and waved. As soon as I shut off the motor, he came up to the car and shook hands.

I was startled by his appearance. His face had grown gaunt and pale. He seemed unaccountably nervous.

After I had driven my car into a nearby barn which served as garage, I followed him to the house.

He immediately brought out brandy and soda and we sat down in the living room. Most of the furniture appeared nondescript but reasonably comfortable. Having had prior experience with icy New England farm houses, I noticed with relief that the room held heat registers.

Monton rambled on rather aimlessly while I sipped brandy. He seemed ill at ease in spite of his new freedom. He spoke of trying his hand at writing again, adding that he had been reading for hours on end. As usual he inquired about my own work; he seemed pleased that I was inching ahead.

When I finished my drink, he conducted me to two upstairs rooms, a bedroom and a sort of sitting room which could serve

as my study. A bathroom was situated nearby at the end of a hall.

Monton apologized for serving dinner in the kitchen that evening but I assured him that I preferred a farmhouse kitchen to any other room.

The meal was simple but adequate. After another brandy, it was my turn to apologize—I simply couldn't keep my eyes open. I had been tired to begin with and the drive had used up my little remaining energy.

I tumbled into a big wooden bed and fell asleep within minutes. But I woke up several times during the night, which was unusual for me. Once I heard someone prowling about downstairs. I wondered if Monton was afflicted with insomnia.

When I came down to the kitchen the next morning, he was sitting over a cup of coffee. He greeted me heartily but it was obvious to me that he hadn't slept well. His face was lined, his eyes red-rimmed.

I concluded that something was preying on his mind, but I decided not to question him at that time.

After finishing my bacon and eggs, I went outside and walked around. Overnight the temperature had dropped. A chill rode the wind. Far overhead geese honked past, heading south. A few red leaves skittered at my feet.

I wrote in my sitting room most of the morning. After a sandwich lunch, I settled down for a long talk with Monton. He appeared to welcome my company, but when I tried to probe into the cause of his evident *malaise*, he became evasive and taciturn. I finally gave up and went for a late afternoon walk along the dirt road which passed the house.

That evening I insisted on helping with the dinner chores. Monton acquiesced after mild objections. After dinner we sat

down with the brandy bottle but my host persistently steered the conversation away from himself.

Soon I settled into a flexible but fairly consistent routine. After breakfast and a brief stroll outside, I would go up to my room and write for about two hours. Correspondence, my journal and a bit of random reading took up another hour. I would then descend for a light lunch and a drink or two. Monton and I would talk for an hour or so and after that I would go for a long ramble along the country roads. Occasionally Monton would join me, but not often. Although something about the house apparently kept him unsettled and nervous, he was nevertheless reluctant to leave it.

Sometimes I'd walk into Juniper Hill and stop at the village store. Usually I'd find three or four "old timers" gathered around the traditional pot-bellied stove, even though that venerable antique didn't yet hold a fire.

Mr. Mays, the storekeeper, often served crackers and cheese with a nip of sherry. It was a pleasant interval.

It was over these afternoon "cracker-barrel" sessions that I learned more about Monton. To my surprise, I found that he had entertained another guest for several months prior to my own arrival. This gentleman was known only as Shiman and nobody seemed to have much information about him. It was believed that he had left abruptly in a huff after a misunderstanding of some kind with Monton.

"Shiman" seemed faintly familiar to me and yet for the proverbial king's ransom I couldn't place the name.

One evening, after several brandies, I took my courage into my tongue and broached the name to Monton.

He started up from his chair, almost spilling his brandy, and his pale face turned paste-grey.

"Where did you hear that name?" he asked ferociously. "I suppose those village gossips have been blatting again!"

Although his attitude offended me, I tried to dismiss the matter.

I waved a hand deprecatingly. "It's really of no consequence, Monton. We'll talk about something else."

He settled back into his chair with a sigh and emptied his brandy glass. "I'm sorry. My nerves haven't been right for some time."

He paused, rubbed a hand across his forehead and resumed. "The truth is, I wasn't going to mention his name, because his entire visit here was an ordeal for me and he finally left in a rage." He shook his head. "I invited him up in good faith and he took advantage of me in every way. He drank liquor like water, ran up bills in my name at the general store, wore my clothes, stole money—and then became savage and abusive when I charged him with it. He walked out during the middle of the night after stealing everything portable he could get his hands on. Hiked down to Juniper Hill, I guess, and then took the morning stage out. I could have brought charges, but I was so glad to get rid of him, I just let it go."

"The kind of house guest one has in a nightmare," I remarked. "I trust I'll measure up a bit better."

Monton looked into my eyes earnestly. "You're welcome to stay for a year, if you want. I'm just sorry that I'm not a better host."

I thanked him, assured him that his hospitality left nothing to be desired and after a final nightcap went up to bed.

But I didn't fall asleep. The name "Shiman" kept going around in my weary head. Finally, towards morning, just as I was about to fall asleep, it came to me. Shiman had worked with

Monton in the bank. Another teller, I believe. Monton had mentioned his name on several occasions. If memory served me right, the two of them had sometimes gone to the race track together. I turned over and went to sleep, but some subconscious stratum of my mind kept restlessly awake. I finally had a real nightmare in which the elusive Shiman, veiled in black, stole into my room and crept stealthily toward my bed. I awoke with a yell and saw sunlight coming through the window.

The next day I told Monton I had decided to return to the city, but he pleaded so for me to remain a time longer, that I finally agreed.

The truth was, although Monton's nervous state worried me a great deal, the quiet house, the peace of the countryside and the clean air soothed and rested me. I hated to leave. Monton, moreover, refused to accept a cent for board, although he at length did agree that I might go into Juniper Hill and buy a supply of groceries once a week.

My writing progressed well; my appetite embarrassed me; and I thoroughly enjoyed the lack of urban interruptions—but for some reason my sleep pattern remained broken and erratic.

I knew definitely by now that Monton prowled the house at least half the night. But something more than that fretted me after midnight. I seemed always to be sleeping in the aura of nightmare. At first I could not put a name to it, nor describe it even in general terms; it continued to hover relentlessly on the edge of sleep.

Gradually, very gradually, it assumed some kind of shape in the shifting landscape of dreams. *Something* seemed to be gliding or stalking across the field in the back of Monton's house. Sometimes it moved across the meadow in a line more or less parallel to the house. Again, it approached the house directly. I

could never see it clearly, but, whatever it was, it filled me with paralyzing fright. I felt that I would rather face a charging bull or a rabid dog than that amorphous thing which came out of the woods or the adjacent marsh at the far end of the meadow and crawled or shambled toward the house.

I didn't mention my nightmare to Monton. His nervous affliction worsened daily. He frequently trembled so violently it became difficult for him to hold a glass in his hand. I became convinced that he actually slept no more than a few minutes during the night. He drank too much, but I was familiar with the symptoms of delirium tremens; I knew his frayed nerves were caused by something else.

Autumn closed in swiftly. Cold winds came over the high barren fields, keening around the old house like lost souls lamenting their wasted lives. Monton, trembling and cadaverous, prowled the house endlessly, by day and by night, pleading with me not to leave and yet stubbornly refusing to reveal the source of the terror which had turned him into a caricature of his former self.

My writing ceased and I took longer walks. I suppose, also, that I myself drank too much. My nights were filled with feverish dreams of darkness and dread. Again and again the same nightmare, with subtle variations, repeated itself: *something* crawled out of the marsh at the far end of the field and squirmed toward the rear of the house. It always seemed to be partially obscured in the hazy moonlight, or by the mist which hovered over the meadow at night, and for this I was infinitely grateful. The nightmare glimpses which I caught of it usually awakened me abruptly, shaking with fright. The hideous thing appeared to be eternally undergoing some unspeakable metamorphosis, but I could never be sure what that metamorphosis

was. Either it had once been human and was in the process of rapidly reverting to its elemental slime—or it was a fearfully-animated skeletal shape which was striving furiously to become human again. In any case, it writhed and squirmed in a manner beyond my poor powers of description.

Late one afternoon, as I entered the house after a long walk, I found Monton, brandy bottle in hand, scrutinizing a calendar. He whirled about, staring at me like a madman.

"This is the date!" he screamed. "This is the date!" He emptied the bottle at a gulp and began laughing hysterically.

It took me a half hour to drag him away from the liquor cabinet and get him settled into a chair, but I would not be put off. I felt that I could tolerate no more.

"You will remain in that chair—without a drink—until you tell me what this is all about," I warned him sternly.

Haggard, weak with terror, he finally agreed. He told me that some years ago, he and his former house guest, Shiman, had become interested in the occult. They had eventually agreed that, if possible, whichever one of the two died first, would attempt to return sometime during the twenty-four hour period of the other's next birthday. This was Monton's birthday. He had apparently prowled through the house in a state of terror since early morning.

Under other circumstances, the whole affair might have seemed idiotic; it reminded me of the kind of pact I myself might have made as an over-imaginative adolescent. But the fear which rode Monton was intense. It was impossible to shrug off an episode which reduced a fellow human being to such a state.

Aside from this, however, to the best of my knowledge Shi-

man was very much alive. According to Monton himself, Shiman, one midnight, had stolen whatever he could carry, hiked down to Juniper Hill and gone off on the morning stage.

When I mentioned this, Monton shook his head. "He left here, left alive and healthy, but he's dead. I can't prove it, but I *feel* it. I possess certain psychic qualities. I have had—premonitions—of his return. And I can't face it. I *cannot*!" He arose, looking around wildly.

I got him seated again, with an effort. I sighed. "All right. Suppose, for the sake of the argument, we accept your statement that Shiman is dead and that you've had premonitions of his return. What have *you* to fear? You, not he, were the aggrieved party. He abused your hospitality, stole what he could carry and crept away while you slept. Why on earth should you fear *him*?"

He glared at me. "Fool!" he screamed. "Can't you comprehend anything? We had many arguments—violent arguments. *He hated me when he left and he will hate me even more when he returns!*"

He slumped back weakly in his chair. In spite of his harsh language, I felt sorry for him. I resolved that the very next day I would attempt to secure psychiatric help. Monton, I concluded, was definitely deranged. Unaided, I felt there was little I could do to rid him of his obsession. My one hope was that if the twenty-four hour period of his birthday passed uneventfully, he would see the absurdity of his beliefs and return to some semblance of normality.

But I finally went upstairs to bed with many misgivings. After his outburst, Monton became mute and sullen, refusing to leave his chair except to bring more brandy from the liquor cabinet.

When I finally fell asleep, I cannot say. And I am equally uncertain whether I actually woke up, or experienced only another nightmare, more terrible than the previous ones.

In any case, it appeared to me that I did wake up shortly before midnight. The entire house seemed uncannily quiet. Beyond that, a deadly chill pervaded it, a chill which pierced through the counterpane and blankets which covered me. I lay shivering with cold, but worse than that was a feeling of foreboding, an acute apprehension, which tightened about me like coils of ice.

Terror rendered me immobile. In a quite literal sense, I was unable to move.

As I lay helpless, a terrific crash shook the house. Along with the splintering of panels, I heard the screech of metal hinges torn from heavy wood.

A minute later a scream which will echo in my mind for the rest of my life rang through the house. It was a scream of ultimate dread and final despair, a scream of such intensity, it seemed to rupture the throat from which it burst.

There came a brief scuffling and then I heard a dragging, shambling sound. It started in Monton's downstairs room and proceeded across the living room, down a corridor, through the kitchen and onto the rear porch. I heard something thudding slowly down the porch steps and finally, mercifully, there was silence.

Either I passed from nightmare into a stupor of sleep, or I fainted. I shall never know. When I did wake up, grey light was filtering through the window. The house was a cave of ice, utterly silent.

My fingers were so numb, it took me twice as long as usual to dress. I felt strongly inclined to remain huddled in bed, but I

knew that something was terribly amiss below stairs. That fearful scream still rang in my head as if it had been uttered only minutes before. I tried to convince myself that I had merely dreamed it, but in this I was not very successful.

Shuddering, I stole down the stairs. Cold air was blowing all through the house; the central heating system seemed to have been overwhelmed. I heard the furnace pounding away, but there was no heat.

The door to Monton's room was open. I knocked once and entered. Monton was not there. The bed had not been slept in. A chair was overturned.

I proceeded down the corridor to the kitchen and here I found the source of freezing air which had invaded the house. The kitchen door, leading to the rear porch, had been completely wrenched loose. The oak panels were smashed, the heavy brass hinges torn from the wood. Cold wind poured through the doorway, flooding the house.

As I looked outside, I saw that a heavy frost had come during the night. Grass everywhere was white and flattened. The fields glittered a little in the first watery light.

If there had been no frost, Monton's disappearance might never have been solved. And I might not be resigned to nightmares for the rest of my life.

The frost must have settled in by midnight, because I could see traces of footprints on the porch, and beyond the porch, along the narrow path which cut through the grass toward the open field at the back of the house.

I went back up to my room, put on boots and a topcoat, and returned to the path at the rear of the house. The frost was thick; the sun was not yet high enough to melt it; and I had little difficulty in following the prints. Sometimes they blurred,

or wavered out of the path, and at intervals there were patches where a struggle appeared to have taken place. The frost-gilded grass would be trampled down and crushed over an area of several feet. Then the wavering prints would begin again.

As I studied them, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stirring. There were *two* sets of prints, not distinct, but unmistakable. One set was made by ordinary street shoes, but the other set seemed to have been made by someone *without shoes* who had terribly thin and bony feet.

Shuddering, I followed the tracks across the field to the stone wall which separated it from the adjacent marsh area. For a few yards the prints trailed along the wall; then I saw where they had crossed the wall and led away on the other side.

Climbing the wall, I followed them straight into the middle of the marsh. At length I reached a spot where a furious struggle appeared to have taken place. The grass and spongy turf were torn up over a large area; I detected a few spots of blood. The prints began again, deeper into the marsh. Suddenly, as I followed, I sank almost to my knees in the wet ground. Looking up in alarm, I saw a sign nailed to a post only a few yards away: DANGER. QUICKSAND. The letters were painted red. Pulling myself from the semi-liquescient mud with great difficulty, I hastily backtracked.

Peering ahead, I saw that the prints continued on past the sign as far as I could see.

Hurrying back to the house, I telephoned for Sheriff Bateman. By the time he arrived, nearly an hour later, the sun was up and the frost was melting.

Bateman, a burly six-footer with cold blue eyes, a mane of grey hair and an aloof, sardonic manner, regarded me quizzically as we started down the path across the field.

"I don't see any footprints, Mr. Brown."

I paused, looking down. Only a few faint smears were visible in the fast-disappearing crust of frost.

As we approached the quicksand warning sign, Bateman stopped abruptly and shook his head. "No sense in going further. We'll need special equipment."

The Sheriff leaned out of his car just before he drove off. "You'd better stay around, Mr. Brown. Just in case." He shrugged. "You were here when it happened." He started his car, scrutinizing me shrewdly, and drove off before I could say anything.

In spite of his suspicions however, Bateman decided to go along with my story. Two days later workmen moved in, heavy plank platforms were unloaded from trucks and massive dredging equipment was hauled into the marsh area.

It seemed to me that tons of water, mud and sand were siphoned, scooped or shoveled away and dumped into the middle of the open field. The huge mass became mountainous.

On the third day Bateman stopped in at the house for hot coffee. He stared out moodily at a few flakes of whirling snow. "If we don't find anything today, we'll have to pull out the crews."

By late afternoon a strong wind arose, scattering the snow squalls in every direction. The clank and roar of dredging equipment became louder as the wind shifted.

I decided I could stand the house no longer. Bundling up in scarf, gloves and windbreaker, I walked down to the marsh.

The work crews regarded me with obvious hostility. They were now convinced that I had told Sheriff Bateman a "cock and bull" story and that they had been wasting their time.

One of them glanced at his watch and nodded. "Two hours to go and we're finished with this crazy job."

I stood and watched the jaws of a giant scoop plunge into the

morass and come up filled with dripping muck which was dropped into the back of a nearby truck.

On the third drop one of the workmen yelled. The scoop was shut off and everyone rushed toward the truck.

Shovels flew. In less than ten minutes something was hauled from the truck and laid out on a piece of canvas. It was so covered with mud and slime, only its general outline was visible, but still I shuddered.

A workman came up with a hose and began washing it off. I think that all of us stood there petrified with horror as the thing was clearly revealed. I know that I did.

It was Monton all right. Even after nearly a week's immersion, however, his features were so twisted by a frightful grimace of terror that I had difficulty in identifying him. I recognized his clothes, of course, and knew there could be no mistake.

But it wasn't the look of horror congealed on Monton's face which kept us standing there speechless. It was the other thing.

Twisted around the corpse of Monton, like some hideous half-human vine, was a decayed skeletal shape with patches of shrunken skin and shreds of clothing still clinging to its rotted frame. The thing's bony arms were wound tightly around Monton's waist and the exposed teeth of its fleshless mouth were sunken deeply into his throat.

At the inquest, which I had to attend, the verdict was suicide. Monton, it was decided, remorseful over the murder of Shiman, had thrown himself into the quicksand marsh at the same spot where he had dropped Shiman's body. Somehow, by a weird coincidence, the two corpses had become entangled many feet below the surface.

No mention was made of the skeletal arms locked around Monton's waist, nor of the teeth which had bitten savagely into

his throat—nor of the fact that the skeleton shape—identified as Shiman's by dental charts—was without shoes.

It was decided that the rear door had been wrenched off its hinges by a sudden blast of unusually strong wind.

Later, I learned that Monton had no uncle. He had apparently embezzled sizable sums from the bank for many years. When suspicions were finally aroused, he had abruptly resigned and purchased the farm in Tunxis. The bank examiners, while able to ascertain the approximate amount of the fund shortage, had been unable to prove Monton's guilt.

The key to the proof of his guilt lay with Shiman, a fellow teller, who refused to talk and also resigned. Shortly after Monton bought his farm house, Shiman had descended on him and commenced blackmail operations. Eventually Monton had rebelled and killed him.

Poor Monton! I still have nightmares about the dead thing which crawled out of the quicksand and came for him on his final birthday.

Apprehension

HE HAD always been afraid. Since childhood he had been aware of a feeling of apprehension, a persistent foreboding. He felt convinced that some frightful fate, some ghastly end, lay in store for him.

And the strangest part of it was, there seemed no basis whatsoever for his obsessive fear. He had inherited enough money to live comfortably without working; his health was splendid; he had many friends. His wife adored him. His two sons looked up to him. His ancestry was sturdy, wholesome; he had never been touched by scandal.

But his apprehension remained. Never for a single day or night did it desert him entirely. As he passed from his thirties into his forties, his foreboding increased.

Finally he became convinced that he must have some creeping insidious disease, that he always had had it, and that, somehow, although it gave no physical evidence of its nature, it flashed continuous warnings to his subconscious mind.

He began a round of hospitals and world-famous clinics which lasted for over a year. But the best specialists remained baffled. The worst they could reveal was that he had a small cavity in one tooth—which he promptly had filled—and that he had a very mild allergy to certain types of pollen. The allergy

was so slight it rarely bothered him, but nevertheless he undertook extended treatments and cleared up all traces of it.

But still he remained apprehensive—more apprehensive than ever. Only his wife and his closest friends knew of his fear, and they were powerless. For years they had vainly attempted to argue him out of it. Both reason and ridicule failed.

At length one of his friends repeated a suggestion which he had made at intervals for ten years: "Go to a good psychiatrist—the best—tell him about it. It may simply be rooted in some unpleasant childhood incident which your conscious mind has forgotten. A good psychiatrist will ferret it out, shine the light on it, banish it forever."

For some reason which he couldn't explain, he had never wanted to go to a psychiatrist. He shied away from it, even though he knew that his friend's suggestion was a sensible one. But perhaps he was no different from many other people who feel a sense of unease, even shame, about psychiatric treatment.

Finally, as his apprehension increased, he made the decision. He would go. He would hunt up the best known, the most widely praised psychiatrist in the country.

After careful inquiry he decided on Doctor Clarence Trustark. They said Dr. Trustark was a genius. Fabulous. As fabulous as his fabulous fees. He had effected cures where all hope had been abandoned. His magic had eased patients out of padded cells, out of strait jackets, out of shadows which seemed to have closed in forever. A mere obsession he would probably find, well—routine.

It took six months to get an appointment but at last he was ushered into Dr. Trustark's waiting room. Fabulous. Subdued lighting. Muted background music, magical, elusive as the music

of dreams. Carpets that caressed your feet like layers of foam. Chairs you seemed to float in. Fear? What was there to fear?

And finally he sat in Dr. Trustark's office. It didn't look like an office. It resembled the cozy den of a world traveler, of a connoisseur who had tastefully selected choice items.

Dr. Trustark himself was the most striking object in the room. His long face seemed infinitely sad; it appeared to have congealed into lines of inexpressible sorrow. It was as if all the woes of his many patients over the years had carved lines of sympathy on his face, as if, like a sponge, he had absorbed into himself all the fears and terrors which had been poured out to him. It was the face of a martyr, a saint. Looking into it, one immediately felt a sense of guilt. What could one's own troubles be compared to the mournful knowledge etched on that face?

Dr. Trustark's masterful smile put him at ease immediately. He had thought he would be tense, that he would answer questions with reluctance, but instead he found himself speaking readily, withholding nothing. For over an hour he answered questions, even volunteering information.

At length Dr. Trustark stopped making notes. He nodded, smiled with a trace of weariness. "There seems to be nothing in the outward, obvious, events of your life. It has been full and happy. Now we must search further. Follow me, please."

Closing the door behind him in an adjoining room, the psychiatrist motioned his patient to a small cot.

"In this room we have absolute privacy," Dr. Trustark assured him. "The walls are completely sound-proof. Nobody can hear you even if you are overcome with emotion. You may tell me anything. Whatever it is will never be repeated beyond these four walls."

Very shortly Dr. Trustark had him in a state resembling hypnosis. The room's soft lighting and the Doctor's soothing voice relaxed him completely. He soon found himself talking about his boyhood, about his early childhood. He recalled many things which he had forgotten. Strangely, perhaps, they were all pleasant. He rambled on and on, absorbed in idyllic memories.

Abruptly Dr. Trustark aroused him from reverie. He tried to sit up and found that he was strapped to the cot. He stared at the psychiatrist in amazement and alarm.

Dr. Trustark's face was suddenly a twisted mask of fury. "Another fool! Another weakling! Another spineless parasite. You always fear *because you have nothing to fear!* No struggle, no sweat, no pain! You are afraid of fear itself! You are a husk, a shadow, a nameless nothing!"

His voice became shrill. "Look at me!" he commanded. "Look at my face! You see what idiots' drivel has done to my face? Like acid marks, burned, drop by drop for thirty years! Weak, useless idiots like you!"

He began pacing the small room, like a caged animal. "You had everything. I had nothing. My childhood was a hell! And whom can I tell? Whom can I tell that I am nightly gnawed by fearful dreams no words can encompass? Whom? No one! The great Dr. Trustark go to—another psychiatrist? I would be laughed at. Do you hear? Laughed at! Ridiculed! And yet I go on listening to the mush of fools like you!"

Striding swiftly toward the cot, he thrust his face close to that of his now thoroughly terrified patient. "Well, I tell you I have had enough! I am through! Finished! And I shall finish with you!"

Turning, he walked to a nearby table, pulled open a drawer and drew out a gleaming scalpel.

He brandished it. "You, my friend, shall now pay for all the fools' drivel of thirty years! Now you have found the source of your fear! At last you have found it! Yes, you *had* something to fear! Truly! *It was me*—waiting here for you these thirty years!"

As his mad laughter rang through the room, the patient began to scream. But even as he screamed, something in the back of his mind assured him that he was screaming in a sound-proof room.

Dr. Trustark's wild eyes appeared above him. The scalpel swept downward toward his face.

The House on Hazel Street

THAT hot dry summer I was nearly penniless and I roamed the gritty streets simply to get out of the insufferable cage which had been advertised as "an airy furnished room." Going from my cubicle to the street was like stepping from a furnace into an oven, but at least there was some degree of difference. I wandered restlessly, weak with the heat and yet too fretful to sit still. I had thought I was familiar with New Haven, but I perspired down streets I had never heard of before. I walked endlessly.

That was the way I discovered the blistered house on Hazel Street. It was set back a bit from its teeming dilapidated neighbors, shuttered, silent, warped and secret. Its grey paint had cracked and peeled away, leaving it dingy and mottled looking. The first time I saw it I experienced an eerie feeling that somehow it stood apart in time, that it was simply the ghost of something else, the visible yet deceptive shell of another structure. But I was overheated to the point of collapse and near delirium produces strange effects.

That evening as I lay on my lumpy cot in Mrs. Fern's suffocating "airy" room, the house kept appearing in my mind. Wearily I told myself that it was nothing but a simple wooden frame house, tenantless, neglected by its owner, left to decay on a

dingy street near a waterfront slum where once—eighty years ago—there may have been a flourishing stand of hazel trees.

But it wouldn't do. The next day I was back on Hazel Street, squinting at the infernal rat-trap. The street shimmered in heat; even the screeching urchins and the snarling little dogs were inactive for once. I stood surveying the house at leisure, oblivious to the sweat runnelling my seedy clothes.

And then the door opened. I didn't see it move, but suddenly it was open and there in the dim shadows someone beckoned.

I had no desire to go in—yet I did. I walked up a moss-chinked brick path, past a front yard overgrown with dead rose bushes and climbed a short flight of creaky wooden stairs. Just inside the door stood a little old man who looked as if he had crawled out from under the eaves after hibernating for half a century. He was so bent and old I wondered that he hung together. His threadbare brown suit looked like so much accumulated rust which had been thrown at him in handfuls. Some had adhered and that was the suit.

But I went in anyway and soon found myself sitting in a dark, cobwebbed sort of parlour filled with big Victorian chairs covered with antimacassars, huge portraits and all manner of bric-a-brac drowning in dust.

My elfish host hovered in the shadows, bowing, clasping his castanet hands. "I observed you watching the house. I knew you were intrigued. So I have asked you in. Would you care for a drink of sarsaparilla?"

At that moment I would have drunk boiled ditch water. I nodded an affirmative.

While I toyed with a cut-glass cup (I drank the sarsaparilla in a gulp) my host introduced himself. "I am Jonathan Sellerby,"

he said. "I have lived in this house for ninety-seven years. I was born here."

I looked at him in surprise. One rarely meets a ninety-seven year old who is not confined to bed or a wheel chair.

His colorless eyes held my own. "Ninety-seven years. But what is that? What is time? A pile of years, like so many bricks? Little slices of life all stacked together? How silly we are! Time is a dimension. Time is eternal."

The intensity and earnestness of his speech startled me. But then I reflected that he had probably been living alone for years. Brooding by himself, he had acquired strange ideas. At least he appeared harmless.

"More sarsaparilla?" I handed him my glass. While he tottered out, I inspected the room, but it was so dark inside with the shutters drawn I could make out few details. The furnishings were uniformly Victorian—massive, ornate chairs and "settles," fringed hangings, an old foot-pump organ, all coated with a deep layer of grey dust.

My host handed me the second cup of sarsaparilla with a courtly bow. "It isn't what it used to be—what it was when I was a young man. It had a taste then. Why that was the big event of the week. On Saturday night we'd go over to Turner's Emporium and order sarsaparilla. I tell you it was something to drink in those days!"

A peculiar look came into his eyes and he fairly shook with excitement. "Maybe—maybe tonight we can go over. Just the two of us. It's right across the street, on the corner. We'll wait till the gas lamps are lit and most of the brewery wagons are off the street and then we'll run over there for a real glass . . ." He stared at me. "What is it, sir? Are you ill?"

I don't know what it was—his crazy rambling, the heat, the musty air of the room—but suddenly I tried to get up and I felt dizzy and weak as an infant. Sinking back in my chair, I shook my head. "Just a dizzy spell. Be fine in a minute."

But I wasn't. Although I didn't feel sick, I remained weak and giddy. The thought of going back out into the blazing heat of the pavements appalled me.

My host, Jonathan Sellerby, sensed my apprehension. His gnomic wrinkled face showed genuine solicitude. He nodded nimbly. "You are welcome to remain," he said. "Tonight it will be cooler. You'll see. And now, if you will excuse me . . ."

As he left the room, I closed my eyes and settled back in my chair. It was an odd business certainly but I assured myself that the sensible thing to do was regain my strength before I ventured onto the streets.

As I half dozed, I wondered why I had come into the house in the first place. What had prompted me? It was absurd, now that I thought about it. Old Mr. Sellerby had simply opened the door and beckoned and I had walked in. How completely ridiculous! But after all I told myself, the house *had* fascinated me. Something about it had attracted my attention, certainly, so it was only natural that I should come in to see Mr. Sellerby, to help Mr. Sellerby go back wherever he was going, where he and I were going, going together tonight. Where were we going? Of course I knew. We were going—going—I almost had it then—yes! yes! yes! We were going to Turner's Emporium for sarsaparilla. The kind of sarsaparilla they didn't make any more. That old-time flavor!

I sat up suddenly. Where was Mr. Sellerby?

He came softly into the room, his eyes intent upon my own,

his finger on his lips. I could hear every syllable he said and yet it seemed as if his mouth formed words without making any sound.

He smiled encouragingly. "It is just a bit too early, too soon, sir. Time is turning back, but it is slow, slow! Now I'm going out to the carriage shed in back. The old things are strong there, friend. You can smell the horses, the harnesses, sweet hay in the stalls—the very dust. It will all come back soon. You must be patient. The past is there, waiting to be called up, waiting to live again. It only takes enough will, enough purpose—enough longing. Patience! Patience!"

Fear inched its way along my spine as he hurried out of the room. He was mad, certainly, and I had better get out of there. But when I moved, I felt helpless. Every last reserve of strength seemed to have ebbed out of me.

And then I began thinking about Turner's Emporium again and I really didn't care. It *would* be fun to go over for sarsaparilla. We'd sit on those little wire chairs, at a marble-topped table, and sip the most delicious sarsaparilla that ever was made. We'd be part of Saturday night. Gem Jackson and the boys would be down on the corner singing and there'd be the rustle of starched skirts along the brick sidewalks. They might even have fireworks somewhere and maybe—

I fell asleep. At least I remembered nothing more until Mr. Sellerby stole quietly into the room and shook my shoulder. I woke up abruptly, forgetting for the moment where I was. And then I gazed around the room in amazement.

The dust was gone. A gas light flickered on one wall and in its soft glow everything looked polished and new. The chairs seemed to have been recently upholstered; the gilded portraits

gleamed; the rug, before nothing but a sort of grey smudge, now revealed a colorful flower pattern of pink and blue. I rubbed my eyes and looked again; the transformation remained.

I stared at Mr. Sellerby. "You've—cleaned the room?"

He smiled gently, shaking his head. "Go to the window and look out."

As I arose, I noticed that his decrepit brown suit had been replaced by a new one which was creased and spotless. He wore a brown bowler hat and jauntily swung a gold-headed walking stick.

Still feeling weak, I walked to the window. The shutters had been opened. Pulling a fringed brocade curtain aside, I looked out.

I gasped. The entire street seemed changed. Gas lamps flared on iron posts. The wide macadam of the roadway was now a narrow strip of cobblestones; the asphalt pavements were red brick. As I watched in disbelief, a big brewery wagon, laden with wooden kegs, rumbled past on the cobbles.

Mr. Sellerby was at my side, pointing toward the corner. "Look there," he said.

On the corner, diagonally across the cobblestone street, was a brightly illuminated store. I read the ornate lettering on the plate-glass window: "Turner's Emporium—Lemon Ice—Sarsaparilla—All Soda Flavors."

Mr. Sellerby took my arm. "Come. We will go over together."

I felt helpless, as if I had no will of my own. Turning from the window, I followed him toward the door. We stepped outside into the soft air of early summer. The scent of roses came to me and as we walked down the brick path toward the street, I saw that the front yard was a mass of blooming rose bushes.

Mr. Sellerby began humming to himself, an old melody

which I had seen once in a tattered song book. I couldn't remember the title but one line went: "In the moonlight, darling, you and I will vow."

Somewhere in the distance I heard mingled voices harmonizing. They were off-key, even harsh, yet for some reason peculiarly nostalgic, strangely evocative. I paused to listen.

Mr. Sellerby smiled up at me. "That will be Gem Jackson and some of the brewery boys. A bit rusty now—out of practice—but wait till later on in the summer. You'll be willing to stand and listen to them all night long!"

As we reached the brick sidewalk, a wave of dizziness swept over me. Somewhere, deep within my subconscious, in my very marrow, a warning flashed. I *knew*—without thinking, without reasoning—that once I crossed that cobblestone street and entered Turner's Emporium, I would never come back. The realization of this filled me with sudden uncontrollable panic, with a terror beyond argument. Shaking off Mr. Sellerby's arm, I whirled and ran back up the path, up the steps to the door. As I pulled it open, I looked, once, over my shoulder.

Mr. Sellerby had turned and was staring at me with astonishment. Finally he shrugged and shook his head. Then a look of inexpressible happiness, of beatific anticipation, changed his face. Swinging his ebony cane, he turned and started across the cobblestone street toward Turner's Emporium.

Slamming the door behind me, I rushed inside, collapsed in a chair and closed my eyes. My brain, or some vital part of my being, seemed to be swimming through a humming sea of space. I think of the word "vertigo" and yet that scarcely expresses what I experienced. I felt disembodied, lost in some nameless dimension over which I had no control. Far, far away, far in infinite distance, I could still hear the faint sound of singing,

off-key, yet haunting, compelling. Finally this faded and at last oblivion swept over me.

It was early morning when I awoke in the same dusty, shuttered room of the afternoon before. Jonathan Sellerby was nowhere in sight. On a nearby table I saw a cut-glass cup and the ring made by its wet base. I got up, giddily, and walked to the door. I called but there was no reply.

As I walked down the brick path, I saw that the front yard was a black tangle of dead rose bushes. The heat had abated somewhat, and I made my way back to my room without incident.

Of course that wasn't the end of it. In a few days the police arrived. Jonathan Sellerby had disappeared and I had been seen emerging from his house. What had I done with his body?

I told them, quite truthfully, that he had gone out the evening prior to my departure and never returned. Hours of grilling got nothing more out of me. I was arrested, released, rearrested and eventually turned loose again with a sullen promise that the case would not be closed.

My own theory is that Jonathan Sellerby sat alone in that shadowy, shuttered house for a half century or more, longing with terrible intensity for the past, for the happy days of his early youth. I think, at the climax, he may have used my own brain, intentionally or perhaps only accidentally, as a sort of battery, or charging unit, to strengthen the unceasing waves of his desire. And again perhaps accidentally—it worked. His ever-present memories of the past, his intense visualizations, his precise recollection of sights and sounds and smells, finally resurrected a period which had passed but which still existed somewhere in the flowing dimension of time.

But how could I tell the police they could find him in Turner's Emporium, sipping sarsaparilla, back around 1890?

The Man in Grey Tweeds

IT WAS a cool evening, dim and grey with fog, and I was hurrying home along the Skerrick Parkway. Strands of fog shrouded the roadside shrubbery, hung in the car lights over the wet asphalt.

As I approached the Harville Overpass, I thought I saw someone striding along the grass centerstrip on my left. Abruptly this person seemed to vanish in the fog and I wondered if I had actually seen anyone at all.

A moment later he lunged into the road directly in the path of my car. I braked, twisted the wheel—and headed straight for the big concrete abutment which supports the Harville Overpass. Brakes screaming, I turned the wheel back frantically, went into a sickening spin and finally stopped. The rear end of the car was headed in the direction I had been traveling, but by some miracle I was still on the road.

My first reaction was one of enormous relief and thankfulness. Then I remembered the erratic pedestrian and I turned hot with anger.

After pulling off the asphalt onto the grass, I got out of the car. I looked around but the pedestrian was nowhere in sight.

"You there!" I called. There was no reply. I yelled again but there was still no response. I walked a short distance down the

road but saw nothing. As if in league with the pedestrian, the fog seemed to thicken.

I walked back to the car and got in. I drove off through fog that was drifting like grey smoke. There was little point in looking further for the pedestrian. He might have passed, unseen, scant yards away.

As I recalled him, he had been grey like the fog. He appeared to be wearing a grey tweed suit, which would not be inappropriate for a late November evening.

I drove very cautiously all the way home and when I got there I had a scotch and water without much water.

Ten days later I picked up the morning paper to read that a lone motorist traveling the Skerrick Parkway had crashed into the Harville Overpass. He had died instantly.

Of course I recalled my own experience. My stomach squirmed momentarily.

Life churns on. I had survived and someone else had been killed; I was sorry for the unlucky driver but I had work to do and I went on pounding my typewriter.

I drove over the Skerrick Parkway a number of times—once on a glaze of ice—and nothing happened.

Then came that foggy evening in March. I was driving home along the Skerrick, not going too fast, but not dawdling either.

When the Harville Overpass came into sight, I glanced toward the grass esplanade on my left. I really didn't expect to see anything.

But I did. Hurrying along the strip, partly obscured by the fog, was a man who looked as if he were wearing a grey tweed suit.

I stared. My heart cancelled a couple of beats. But I was ready this time. I wasn't going as fast as before anyway and now I

touched the brake lightly, tentatively. An instant later the figure in grey darted onto the highway. I pumped the brake firmly, veered to the right and stopped.

Shifting to neutral, I yanked the emergency brake and leaped out. The man in grey tweeds was nowhere in sight. I ran down the highway yelling; I pounded across the center strip to the other side; I came back again.

I was approaching my car when another one came past. The driver looked at me as if I were a maniac. He stepped on the gas.

I was calm when I got home but not calm enough to sleep. I sat up with a sympathetic fifth of scotch till three a.m.

A few days later I had it all figured out. This corkhead in the grey tweeds had some reason, occasionally, to cross the Skerrick Parkway. Maybe he lived around there somewhere. Twice, just by coincidence, I had almost run him down. Both times, just as it happened, the evening had been foggy.

He was a highway hazard and he'd get his sooner or later. I wasn't going to worry about it.

But my mind kept asking annoying questions, such as why-did-he-disappear? And what-about-that-other-driver-who-was-killed?

I didn't answer. I didn't try to answer—until I picked up the morning paper that August day.

Another car had crashed into the Harville Overpass; three people had been killed. The driver, seriously injured, might survive.

Nearly two months passed before I got to see him. I drove over to the Elmcrest Convalescent Home and found him sitting in a wheelchair on the lawn.

He was a thin man of about forty with a normally narrow

face which now looked cadaver-lean. He sat staring vacantly in the mellow October sunshine. I had heard he might not walk again. Relatives of the three deceased passengers were suing him for some fantastic amount which his small insurance would not even begin to cover. If he ever got well enough to work again, his pay would probably be attached for the rest of his life. It was not much of a future.

At first he thought I was an insurance investigator and he refused to talk. At length, however, I managed to draw him out.

His voice was weary but still stubborn. "Everybody says I was drunk. I wasn't. I'd had three drinks, spaced. I wasn't any more drunk than I am now."

"What made you hit the abutment?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nobody believes me," he replied bitterly. "I'm tired of telling it. But I'll tell it once more."

He swallowed some ginger ale. A frown creased that part of his forehead which was not covered by bandages. "I was coming along at a fairly good clip, but not over the limit—fifty-five. It was starting to fog up. All of a sudden this guy steps off the esplanade right in front of my car. He was so close I couldn't stop. I tried to swerve. I hit the abutment."

He finished his ginger ale and sat there looking at nothing. When he spoke again, he sounded more bewildered than bitter. "I tried not to kill one guy and I killed three."

A nurse came and fussed with him and I got up and walked around and came back. "What did his guy look like?" I asked. "This guy that came off the center strip?"

He shrugged. "I just got a look at his back. He was about average size. No hat. Wore a suit. Looked like grey tweed."

I thanked him, pressed a bill into his hand and drove home.

For the next month I played the role of private eye. I quit

banging my typewriter and began haunting newspaper morgues, hospital emergency rooms, coroner's offices, police headquarters.

It was a long tedious business and I won't bore you with the details. But I finally found what I wanted.

Nearly three years before my little adventure began, a man had been killed on the Skerrick Parkway near the Harville Overpass. The driver who killed him said he had suddenly stepped off the center strip into the path of his car. It had been foggy and the driver had not seen him on the esplanade. The victim's own vehicle had apparently stalled in the other lane. He had got out, crossed the esplanade, and then stepped directly into the path of the oncoming car.

He was district sales manager for a paint company, happily married, sane and sober. He was wearing a grey tweed suit.

On foggy evenings after my research ended, I got in the habit of driving up the Skerrick Parkway, past the Harville Overpass. For a long time I didn't see anything. I started wondering about the long crazy arm of coincidence again, in spite of the conclusions I had come to. Maybe . . .

But there was no maybe. Because one foggy evening in late February as I was approaching the Harville Overpass, I caught a glimpse of a man in a grey suit hurrying along the esplanade. I wouldn't have seen him if I hadn't been watching for him. This time I didn't slow down, not much anyway. I just kept rolling along and when the man in the grey suit suddenly stepped in front of the car, I didn't touch the brake. It took a concentrated effort of will. Muscles tightened in my throat; my foot pulled to hit the pedal.

But I wouldn't let it. And there wasn't any bump, not the faintest thud or jar. It was just like driving through air.

Something made me stop the car anyway and I got out and

went back but of course there wasn't anything you could see. Nothing but the fog, grey and clinging, and colder than I had ever known it before.

I drove home and sat up drinking scotch.

You may never encounter the man in grey tweeds on the Skerrick Parkway, but you may run down a woman in a blue dress on the Crown Connector, or a boy in overalls on the Mulberry Turnpike. You'll see them and maybe run over them, and perhaps lose your life trying to avoid them, but of course they won't really be there.

For I am convinced that our highways are haunted—haunted by the ghosts, the psychic residues, the phantoms—call them what you will—of those who have been killed. When certain conditions of time, atmosphere, weather, etc. are favorable, these poor wraiths are visible again, once more reenacting their violent ends.

It is said that those who die violently, cruelly and uselessly, may return to the spot where they were killed. Is it so surprising that of the thousands who have died on our highways, a few should return?

I think not. The man in grey tweeds was one. There must be others.

I hope you don't meet any of them. . . .

The North Knoll

WHEN I was a child, I spent part of each summer vacation gathering blueberries on my Uncle Ira's farm in northern Connecticut, near the village of Juniper Hill. Uncle Ira's land was a "farm" only by courtesy; most of it consisted of dense woods, neglected meadows and treacherous marsh and swamp areas. But it was an ideal place in which to pick fresh blueberries when they were in season.

Ordinarily I went blueberrying with either Aunt Hess or Aunt Minerva, or both. We usually came back with a water-bucket blue with berries right to the brim.

The untended meadows, overrun with birch saplings, yielded a rich crop, and so did the various knolls which interspersed the woods and swampland.

A knoll is a small rounded hill or little plateau of land lifting above its surrounding terrain. I imagine it is glacial in origin. It consists of sandy, gravelly soil and is ordinarily far less overgrown than the surrounding area. Some knolls are virtually barren of vegetation save for juniper bushes and dried lichen. On my uncle's land, a knoll might be situated deep in the tamarack woods, or it might provide a dry and stable refuge in the midst of a cattail bog.

Many of these sun-drenched knolls supported masses of low-

growing blueberry bushes which yielded a rich harvest of azure-powdered fruit. My aunts knew the location of every knoll and visited them frequently during blueberry season.

There was one knoll, however, which they always avoided. I had never seen it. I knew of it only by hearsay. They referred to it as The North Knoll and I had been warned repeatedly never to go near it. It lay at the far end of my uncle's "farm" and it was entirely surrounded by a dismal morass which was said to contain quicksand.

At the end of one unrewarding summer's day—the blueberries were running out—my Aunt Minerva, in a moment of desperation, I assumed, suggested that we visit The North Knoll.

Aunt Hess stared at her. "Minerva Searles, have you lost your wits? You know—"

Then they looked at me, exchanged glances and decided to say no more.

Later, when they thought I was out of earshot, I heard Minerva murmur something about it all being years ago and that "it might have gone by now."

My curiosity was aroused to fever pitch. But my aunts kept a close rein on me, and in any case I'm not at all sure I would have had the courage to penetrate to The North Knoll alone. Even when I approached the silent tangled marsh area which surrounded it, I felt a sense of uneasiness. So I never saw it.

Not in those days, that is. Decades passed. My aunts died and I came less and less to the farm. But I often remembered it. I recalled the great fun I had had tramping about its swamps and sun-soaked meadows. Beyond that, city life began to depress me. I wanted some woods to walk around in. And I wanted a quiet place where I could write in peace.

Eventually I drove up to see my Uncle Ira. He was a very old

man by then, arthritic and partially deaf, and I gathered that his money was just about gone. When I offered him a good price for the overgrown hundred-odd acres which he called his "farm", he accepted my offer without hesitation. He was to have life use of the farmhouse. I agreed to renovate several rooms for my own living quarters and studio. We were both happy with the arrangement and we signed the transfer deed as soon as possible.

Once my own three rooms were repaired and painted, I moved in speedily. Within a week I was at work on my new novelette.

Uncle Ira was willing to pass the time of day when I was in the mood, but he never intruded on me. I began taking long afternoon walks through the woods and fields of my new holding.

It seemed an ideal life for me. Although the "farm" had become so overgrown with brush and saplings, many of the old paths were almost obliterated, this only added to my enjoyment. Set some people down in a thick woods and they act like new arrivals on an alien planet. Not I. I felt relaxed and at peace. I slipped through the woods like an Indian of old, making little sound, missing nothing.

One blistering hot August afternoon, I left "for the brush" shortly after lunch. The sun was merciless whenever I crossed open fields, but it was relatively cool in the woods. I wandered on and on, aimlessly. I had no particular destination.

At length I found myself at the fringe of the marsh which surrounded The North Knoll. Instantly everything came back to me and I knew at once that I would never rest until I had explored the forbidden North Knoll of my childhood. Until that moment, I had forgotten it. Now I remembered my aunts' dire

warnings and I was enthralled anew. What was it Aunt Minerva had said those long years ago? Something like, "It might have gone by now."

I must admit, even, to a feeling of disappointment when I considered the years that had elapsed. There seemed little likelihood that "it" was still on the knoll. Probably, I reasoned, long ago, a wildcat, a great horned owl or something like that had lived near the knoll. Someone had been frightened by its unexpected appearance and a "scare story" had started.

As I slipped into the forbidding marsh area which encircled the knoll, I saw that traveling might be easier than it was during the years of my childhood. The intensely hot dry summers which we had experienced almost yearly for a decade had dried up many of the dank pools and dark rivulets which made up the morass.

But there were plenty of them left and I had to watch my footing as I went along. If there had ever been a path, I could find no trace of it. I sprang from tussock to tussock, from root cluster to sand bank. Of course my feet got wet, but it didn't matter. The marsh water was not cold and my old shoes had been soaked before.

In spite of my mood of adventure, of being "on a lark", I began to feel peculiarly depressed as I advanced. I could not explain it. I finally decided it was a dark residue from my childhood. How childhood fixations and fears, no matter how unfounded, can carry through the decades, through an entire lifetime!

At length I noticed that bird and insect life had begun to disappear. I heard nothing but the trickle of dark water, the suck of sand at my shoes. I thought of the old quicksand story and advanced warily, but I seldom sank over my shoetops.

As I continued to leap ahead, utter silence descended.

Quite suddenly I was out of the watery marsh area and moving up a small slope between pine trees. A strange mood of apprehension settled on me. I tried to shake it off, almost angrily, but could not.

I walked up the incline, among the pines, and found myself on the forbidden North Knoll.

It was larger than I had expected. At the near end a cluster of big quartz boulders gleamed whitely in the afternoon sun. Near the center was a slight depression in which reared the rotting remains of a huge wild crabapple tree. Beyond the depression lay a sizable flat expanse consisting almost entirely of a thick massed carpet of dry, dead-looking grey-white lichen which appeared as if it had been accumulating undisturbed for many decades. Over all hung the heavy August heat haze, shimmering and intense. The marsh had made few inroads on the knoll; it had sent a few tangled creepers up the sides but these stopped abruptly where the flat carpet of crunchy lichen began.

One of the first feelings that struck me was a weird sense of *antiquity*. I felt that the quartz boulders, the rotting crabapple tree and the deep growth of dense lichen had remained undisturbed for centuries. Even the oppressive August heat and queer haze which danced before my eyes seemed somehow timeless.

I saw no evidence of animal, bird or insect life. Not even a sulphur butterfly nor an industrious bee. It was cicada time, yet I listened in vain for the harsh steel-coil sound. I heard nothing.

It was simply, I told myself, that the knoll was isolated because of the surrounding swamp area. But I advanced among the quartz boulders in a mood of uneasiness.

Nothing happened and I cursed myself for an imaginative fool. Crossing through the depression where the crabapple

reared, I continued on until my feet crunched into the dried-out lichen which completely covered the rest of the knoll.

I had never known lichen so deep before. I sank halfway to my knees. It must have been growing there for untold years.

As I advanced, my eyes were dazzled by the shimmering heat waves. I felt as if the heat itself was almost palpable.

Suddenly, with the certainty of instant instinctive terror, I knew that I had been apprehended. I felt the immediate proximity of an alien *awareness*. I understood at once that it was wholly lethal and malignant.

I whirled, staring back toward the quartz boulders. There was nothing. I looked into the small hollow holding the rotted crab-apple. Nothing. I squinted across the flat lichen expanse, toward the edge of the marsh. Nothing at all.

In spite of the unaccountable panic which had so swiftly overwhelmed me, I had a stubborn streak. I had to live with myself. And I didn't want to run until I at least saw what it was I was fleeing from.

Although every fiber in me urged precipitate flight, I temporarily stood my ground. I looked down at the thick tangled carpet of dead lichen. I looked straight up. My eyes strained through the wavering layers of August heat which hung over that accursed knoll.

Quite without warning, I saw it. It was about halfway across the lichen expanse, shambling and writhing in that shimmering air, coming straight toward me.

If it had solid substance, I cannot say what that substance was. It looked like a concentration, a focus, of the heat waves themselves. In color it was like the lichen, a dead grey-white. It had a shape, if shape it might be called, but its continuous prancing, twisting movement made that shape hard to describe.

It was the size of a small horse and it bore a vague and repellent resemblance to one of our anthropoid apes.

But it had appendages no ape ever possessed. And it coiled and contorted itself there in that hot summer air, inches above the ground, in a way which seems literally beyond description.

I felt that it was born of that concentration of shimmering heat waves above the dead lichen beds and yet I sensed that in some respects it was by no means wholly of the air. *I knew that it ate.* And I felt, with a wild surge of terror quite beyond reason or remonstrance, that I was to be its food.

I whirled and ran. I rushed into the depression, past the rotted crabapple tree, toward the quartz boulders and the pine slope.

I did not dare turn around, and yet I *knew* that the thing was there in the air at my back, twisting and turning as it attempted to fasten itself on me. I sensed that its forward motion through that hot dead air was somehow limited by its own indescribable convolutions, and this gave me hope.

But as I pounded into the depression, it gained on me. Whereas I had to plunge down the one incline and then climb up the next, the thing at my back went straight across. I could feel its squirming, writhing appendages almost around my neck.

My terror and physical loathing at this point could not be encompassed in words. There are climaxes in which language communication simply breaks down when faced with certain intensities of experience.

I felt that all Hell, that everything nauseous and obscene that had ever lived, or ever tried to live, was at my back. I felt that no possible fate I could ever imagine would be worse than the hideous leap of that writhing thing onto my protesting flesh.

Crazed with fear, I rushed forward. And then something hap-

pened which I am convinced saved my life. In my frenzy to escape, I misjudged my direction as I reached the quartz boulders. I ran into one of them, severely gashing my leg, and fell prone.

At that point, the pulsating horror had nearly caught me. As I fell flat, and as the intense pain of the deep gash registered on my brain, my indescribable pursuer overshot me, for a moment actually seemed to have lost me.

I felt this, rather than saw it. And I sensed, also, that the attack of the twisting shape was not entirely physical. I felt that it was flinging itself at me down through the funnel of my own fear.

The gash on my leg, which momentarily diverted my attention, briefly broke the hideous psychic connection of intense fear which the thing had established with me.

Disregarding the blood spurting out of my leg, I arose and rushed frantically down the pine slope into the marsh.

My memory after that remains vague. Torn, lacerated and covered with mud, I staggered out of the swamp. Somewhere I stopped long enough to apply a crude tourniquet to my bleeding leg.

When I finally arrived home, Uncle Ira washed me, got me into bed and called the village doctor. My leg wound was dressed and I was given a strong sedative.

My leg gash healed quickly, but the psychic shock of my experience did not even begin to subside for days. Uncle Ira was sensitive enough not to question me, and he never made any reference to The North Knoll until I myself was ready to tell him what had happened.

I did not want to relive my terrifying experience, even in memory, but I realized that my disclosure of the facts might well act as a healthful catharsis.

Uncle Ira listened without comment until I had finished. He nodded at length, knocking out his pipe on the wood stove.

"There's been—somethin'—on that knoll since the first white settlers came to these parts. It goes back beyond that even. In olden times there was a story that the Pequot Indians once made some kind of human sacrifice on those quartz boulders. I 'magine it was some poor devil they'd taken as a prisoner of war. One of the local tribe of Tunxis, likely.

"Forty years or more ago a hunter—a poacher, he was—chased a deer onto that knoll. He left in a hurry. Dropped his rifle and all. He was lucky. That thing got the deer instead of him. He never told the story till years later and then he was drunk and hardly anybody believed him. But a few—a few who knew the old tales—believed him."

He shook his head. "It was my fault. I should have warned ye. But it's been so long. And I'm beginnin' to forgit things. Besides, I niver figgered ye'd go through that swamp. Was a time, a body could hardly git through. Must be a-dryin' out."

I assured him that he was not to blame. When I felt better, I tried to look up some of the old records, but it was no use. Many were missing and the remaining ones were too incomplete to construct any coherent account of that hellish knoll.

But I had a high barbed-wire fence placed around the entire marsh area which surrounds The North Knoll, and I put up big signs reading: QUICKSAND—KEEP OUT.

I have no sure explanation for the loathsome thing which pursued me that day. It may have been some monstrous sort of surviving elemental spawned when nature was experimenting with early life forms. Perhaps it was what the ancients called a "genius loci", an entity, quite often malevolent, which has attached itself to a specific limited area of landscape.

I cannot say. My fervent hope, however, is that the malign writhing creature never ventures beyond The North Knoll.

Years have passed and I have begun to forget my nightmare experience. But, occasionally, usually on a hot August afternoon when heavy heat waves are shimmering above the fields, I suddenly shudder and turn cold.

Some of my friends laugh at me. But they are invariably the ones who have never read this account.

The Dump

PULLING aside the dingy kitchen curtain, she looked out. "It's starting again," she said tensely.

To the north, a scant mile from the house, a great greasy billow of black smoke rolled skyward. Squealing sea gulls flapped over huge mounds of smouldering trash. Although she couldn't see them from the window, the woman knew that the reeking wasteland literally crawled with an army of voracious rats.

Somehow, the omniscient, all-encompassing State had overlooked the dump. In its dynamic zeal to provide prefabs, food capsules and carefully edited newstapes for all citizens, the State may have bypassed the dump temporarily.

There was a rumor to the effect, however, that the wasteland had been deliberately preserved as a sort of monstrous museum area, a "See-how-things-used-to-be" tourist attraction.

In any event, in the very midst of marvels of efficiency, exactitude and unending impersonal energy, there it remained, a sour, rat-sluced tract carefully shunned by the average State citizen.

If people still existed in the dump itself, or even in its immediate environs, it was generally conceded that it was their own fault. The State always stood ready to house and feed the indigent.

Broken springs groaned as the man arose from a cot. He

shook his head. "Wish you'd relax, Lucy. Little smoke ain't hurtin' you none."

She turned, eyes bright with anger. "*Little smoke!*" she repeated. "Smoke that seeps right through the shingles into the house! Smoke that gets in your lungs, in your hair, in your food, in your clothes—even in your skin! I tell you I've had enough of smoke and cinders and rats—and sea gulls! *Sea gulls!* Hah! Those dirty birds screeching like hungry cats all the time. They're dump gulls. Garbage gulls! I'd like to wring their filthy necks!"

Slipping into a threadbare jacket, the man started toward the kitchen door. "You sure get worked up over nothin'. Sea gulls got to live, like everything else."

The woman's voice rose in fury. "I suppose you'd say the rats have got to live too! You'd even defend the rats!"

The man paused, his hand on the door knob. He looked agrieved. "Why that ain't fair, Lucy. We fight the rats. You know that."

"You fight them!" she mocked. "Well, let me tell you something! You're losing the fight! The rats are winning! They're taking over! There must be a million out there!"

The man rubbed his chin reflectively. He looked thoughtful. "They're tough, all right. But they're under control. We club a couple hundred to death, most every night." He opened the kitchen door.

As he stepped out, the woman's fury seemed suddenly to vanish. Her voice was no longer shrill; it was flat, listless. "When will you be back, Ralph?"

He shrugged. "Can't say, exactly. We might go on a rat kill. Take a couple hours. Maybe we'll poke around for stuff till dark. Maybe just gab over a can of mulligan." He closed the door.

From the window, she watched him cross the littered back yard and disappear in the adjacent cattails.

Supper time came and went and he had not returned. She had a cup of tea and a biscuit and then sat up, trying to read, but found herself unable to concentrate. Finally she crossed to the kitchen window.

Darkness had fallen, but the Enemy was still visible, revealed in the lurid flickering light of towering trash fires. At night the dump seemed even more forbidding. You never knew what that flame-riven darkness might conceal.

As she stood at the window, she imagined that the approaches to Hell itself might resemble the scene before her—fires circling the night and beyond in the deeper darkness terrors and frights unspeakable.

At last, wearily, she undressed for bed. But she did not sleep peacefully. This evening the nightmare came swiftly. There were variations, but the essential outline was nearly always the same.

From the outside darkness, from above and below and from all sides, came subdued but ominous whispers of sound—gnawing, scraping, squeaking, scuttling. And then the house began to settle, literally to sink, like a ship in the sea. The busy rats had eaten away its foundations and now it was being engulfed in great tides of trash. The dump was closing in on it, like a monstrous growth. Soon it would disappear out of sight in the slimy darkness. As it slipped into the sour earth, the rats broke through. They poured through the windows, the doors, down the chimney—huge, hairy creatures with red eyes and yellow flashing fangs. They leaped upon the bed, lunged for her throat.

She was sitting up in bed, screaming, bathed in sweat, when she finally awoke.

Ralph had not yet returned. She got up, drank tea, and went

back to bed for a few minutes' fitful sleep in the hour or two before dawn.

She was sitting in the kitchen when Ralph returned. Grey light was filtering over the cattails. In the distance a sea gull squealed.

Ralph yawned, stretched, sat down. "Quite a night. We musta clubbed a hundred rats. Maybe more. Jim Tavey got nipped, but not bad. When we got back, Fred Morgee's woman had a pail of the best damned mulligan I ever ate. Hot and spicy! Jeepers, that was good!"

She glared at him "That filthy woman! Living in the dump! Bad enough to live next to it!"

He spread his hands. "Why Lucy, it ain't bad. Morgee's rigged up a shack with a real tin roof. Got a floor and a pot-belly. Got bunks. Sheila Morgee's the happiest female I ever did see."

She slammed her fist on the table top. "Well she can have her filthy shack in the dump! *I'm* through! Living here right on the edge is getting just as bad as being inside. Cinders, smoke, smells, sea gulls—and rats, rats, rats!" Her voice rose hysterically.

He spoke soothingly. "What can we do, Lucy? Twenty years ago we paid ten thousand for this place. Now the State wouldn't give us over three. How long would that last? In a year or so we'd be wards. Broke. The State would take us."

"What's so bad about that?" she countered. "We'd have two rooms in a plastic prefab. Plenty of food capsules. An entertainment screen. Now they even give you the choice of a permajade juniper bush or a simulated maple tree for the lawn."

He snorted. "Lawn! Artificial grass you spray green in the spring and brown in the autumn!"

Her voice rose again. "That's better than looking out at those

dingy cattails all day long—watching them shake as the rats swim around the roots!”

He was silent.

She continued, her voice weary but resolute. “I’m through, Ralph. I can’t stand those nightmares no more. If you won’t sell to the State, I’ll bring suit for my share and I’ll leave anyway. I’m not going on living like this.”

He shook his head, frowning. “I won’t fight, Lucy, if you really want to go. You can keep what the State gives for the house. But I’m telling you, it’s a mistake. We ain’t got much here, but at least we’re alive.”

Her voice was bitter. “I’ve had enough. I’m selling. If you won’t come, go and live with the rats in the dump!”

He went to bed. He knew that further argument would be futile. A few weeks later the man from the State came. Ralph had already signed the papers, waiving his share of the proceeds from the sale of the house. The State had agreed to pay twenty-seven hundred.

Sitting down in the one stable armchair remaining in the living room, the State man—a Mr. Feckwith—opened his document case. “All that remains,” he explained to Mrs. Leeson, “is for you to sign these papers.” He passed them over to her.

As she read, a look of consternation spread on her careworn face. “What does this mean? Don’t I get the twenty-seven hundred?”

Mr. Feckwith coughed politely. “Well, you see, Mrs. Leeson, before you can become a State ward and qualify for a prefab, plus furnishings and food, you have to turn all assets over to the State. Otherwise you are not considered, ah, dependent.”

She hesitated. “But I—I won’t have a penny!”

Mr. Feckwith smiled reassuringly. His chubby face beamed.

"You won't *require* a penny, Mrs. Leeson! All needs are taken care of. Shelter, food, clothes, medicine. And you'll have all the extras—an entertaintime screen, the news tape delivered every day, the monthly excursion. Think of it!"

She thought of it. She thought of it while black soot drifted past the windows, while the sea gulls squealed and the dump fires flared. She thought of it and she signed.

Three days later the State sent a tronicar to pick her up. She was glad that Ralph was away. It made things easier.

As the car sped off, she turned for a last sight of the dump. A huge pall of thick smoke hung over the area. Tireless sea gulls flapped above the refuse heaps, screeching raucously. Sighing with relief, she looked away, concentrating on the tronicar's gleaming interior. Within seconds the dump was far behind her.

Her new life was like a dream. She had two private rooms in a plastic prefab, complete with entertaintime screen, newstape projector and remote music disc. Food, mostly in capsule form, was delivered daily. The trugrass lawn, freshly sprayed, boasted a simulated maple tree over eight feet high.

If she felt ill, all she needed to do was press the button marked "Dispensary." A State doctor would arrive in three minutes.

Sitting in her foamease chair, in front of the entertaintime screen, she reveled in her new luxury. No dump smoke seeped into these rooms. No soot drifted past the windows. When she looked out, instead of dingy cattails she saw the bright green simulated maple tree and the sparkling trugrass lawn. No more rats scampering across her back yard. No noisy sea gulls circling overhead.

It was like heaven.

She felt sorry for Ralph. He would probably die in the dump.

He'd end his days in some dirty shack, slurping up mulligan stew. He'd die alone, some dismal night, while the dump fires flickered and the filthy rats squealed and scuttled in the darkness.

After the first week she got to know some of her new neighbors. There were twenty-nine other units on her block, each with its own trugrass lawn. Some, like hers, boasted a simulated maple tree. Others were graced with one of the permajade juniper bushes. She was welcomed warmly. They were all very friendly, all very polite. She never mentioned the dump. They talked about the past as if it were life on another planet. They talked about their favorite programs on the entertaintime screen, about where they had gone on the monthly tronicar excursions sponsored by the State. They talked about their illnesses.

And yet, it seemed to Lucy Leeson, they did not actually talk very much. Perhaps it was too much effort. Mostly they just sat in front of their entertaintime screens and watched. Most of their meals they could swallow in capsule form without even moving from their foamease chairs.

The weeks came and went and finally a man appeared one morning and sprayed the trugrass lawn a uniform brown. A week or so later he came back, worked a mechanism at the base of the simulated maple tree and all the bright green leaves curled up tight and invisible against the limbs. It was autumn.

The man told her they had tried leaving everything green all year round, but in the long run the people didn't approve of it. They liked to look out, some fine spring morning, and see the trugrass lawn and the maple trees unexpectedly green again. The service men came just before dawn to spray the lawns and unfold the maple leaves.

It was a landscaping marvel. The grass never had to be cut

and Lucy knew that the simulated maple tree would never be over eight feet tall. No pruning, no troublesome roots, no falling leaves to rake.

Her only criticism was that the birds seemed to avoid both lawn and tree. She looked out, rather wistfully, in hopes of seeing a bird. But she rarely saw one. She remembered with a pang of nostalgia the red-winged blackbirds which descended on the cattails bordering the dump every spring. They were such bright, frolicsome, saucy creatures! But they never flew over the trugrass lawns.

After awhile, Lucy stopped visiting her neighbors. For some reason which she could not specifically name, they depressed her. They were old and listless and often ill, but it was more than that.

At length she knew the reason. They were dead; they were corpses waiting for interment. They would be transferred from the plastic prefabs to State permaplastic coffins with scarcely a groan of protest. They were just waiting for death, day after day. Consciously, they swallowed their capsules, read their daily newstapes and saw with their eyes riveted on the screens. But subconsciously they had stopped living. Subconsciously they longed for death to release them from the bondage of State security, State brainwashing, the bland and eternal aura of State assurance and reassurance.

She began to feel that she was being smothered to death in the plastic prefab. She grew to loathe the food capsules. The endless entertaintime programs finally filled her with boredom. The newstapes were some diversion but she resented them because she sensed that all the news had been too carefully sifted and predigested beforehand.

She stared out at the meek leafless tree and hated it. Sometimes she sat on the floor because she was so tired of the foam-

ease chair. Once she pressed the "Dispensary" button just to see what would happen, but she never tried it again because she was subjected to a tedious two-hour examination which left her exhausted and taut with irritation. The examination was thorough but so impersonal she was left feeling like an inanimate object.

She no longer had nightmares about the dump rats but now a new and even more terrifying dream haunted her sleep. She dreamed that the State, unable to supply prefabs fast enough to meet the thousands of new applicants, secretly filled some of the food capsules with sleeping powders. The sleeping victims, chosen at random, were then carried out of their quarters, slipped into State permaplastic coffins and quietly buried. In her dream the plastic prefab became a permaplastic coffin. Doped with sleeping powder, she was buried alive. She would wake up, night after night, screaming, throwing her arms in the air to claw her way out.

At length she began to sit up most of the night; during the day she would sleep at frequent intervals in the foamease chair. This routine effectively ended the dream of being buried alive, but she still dreaded the nights.

She would sit for hours thinking about the dump—the sea gulls squealing, the trash fires flaring, soot flying past the windows and finally Ralph tramping in with his crazy stories about the rats or the mulligan stew or the fortune someone had found in a discarded fruit jar.

She had hated it all before but now she wasn't sure she hated it very much. Maybe she no longer hated it at all. What was it Ralph had said? How did it go? Oh yes: "We ain't got much here, *but at least we're alive.*"

The words echoed in her mind. She thought of them a hundred times a day.

It was a small thing that decided her. One morning she was

standing at the window, looking out across the trugrass lawn, when a State dispensary ambucar drove up. Two hospital men entered the prefab across the road. In a few minutes they came out carrying old Miss Quinsonby in a plastic bag.

Lucy Leeson felt sick. Although she was perfectly aware that Miss Quinsonby had been ailing for months, the memory of her nightmare came back to torment her. Was it possible that the State actually did "dispose" of the very old and infirm in order to make room for new applicants? The thought was fantastic, and yet the State people were so deadly, impersonally efficient in so many ways . . .

That very afternoon she signed up for the next monthly tronicar excursion. She had nearly two weeks to wait and she counted the days. One afternoon when she was sleeping in the foamease chair she had a new nightmare. She dreamed that she became ill and pressed the Dispensary button. In the prescribed three minutes two State hospital men appeared. One of them winked at the other and they both smiled slyly at her. Then she noticed that the one who had winked held something behind his back. It was a big folded plastic bag. She awoke with a scream.

On the morning set for the tronicar excursion, she stuffed some personal items in a small kit and went outside to wait. The tronicar driver was supposed to stop and touch her signal chime, but she was taking no chances. She waited nearly an hour, afraid the car might come early. When it finally swung into view down the street, she hurried to the ramp.

After the tronicar had picked up its cargo of State wards and left the immediate prefab area, the driver began an oral travelogue, describing new buildings, sites and developments as the car sped past. She scarcely heard his monotonous spiel droning over the speaker system.

Her plans were made. When the car stopped in Newbridge,

she would get off on some pretext and simply keep on going. She knew the tronicar excursions were tied to a rigid schedule. The driver would not wait for her very long.

Assuring him that she would return in five minutes, she got out in Newbridge and scurried away in the crowds. Once out of sight, she signaled for a cruisecab.

As the cab slid smoothly through city traffic toward the highway which skirted the dump, horrible doubts assailed her. Suppose Ralph had left? Suppose all of them had left? What would she do? Where could she go? The State owned the house. She did not possess any money. She would have to go back to the prefab, back to the trugrass lawn and the simulated maple tree, back to—*Death*. Once she had spoken it in her mind, she kept on repeating it. Death, death, death. She would have to go back to death. She would have to go back to death.

It became a refrain ringing in her head. The crisp voice of the driver came through the partition tube, startling her. "This is the refuse area, lady. Where did you want to go?"

Her heart began to pound. She looked out the window, searching for landmarks. "About a mile yet. There's an old empty warehouse and then some catalpa trees. Right after that."

In a minute or two the cruisecab glided to a stop. She paid the driver and got out. Her heart was pounding so hard she could scarcely breathe.

"You want me to wait, lady?" The driver regarded her quizzically.

She shook her head. "No—no thanks. I—I'm meeting someone here."

The driver glanced at the smoky pall of the dump and shrugged. Seconds later the cruisecab was disappearing down the highway.

She walked past the clump of catalpa trees bordering the

highway. There were bushes and then set back a bit would be the house. She stopped, staring, motionless. The house was gone. The State had torn it down and filled in the cellar hole.

As she looked across the littered back yard toward the clump of cattails, she experienced a strange sense of unreality. Sea gulls cried overhead and the sun filtered down through a pall of smoke, but the familiar scene seemed eerily unfamiliar.

Scowling, she closed her eyes momentarily and forced down the panic crowding within her. The house was gone; that was what made everything seem so strange, so unreal. Now she would take the little path that led across the back yard into the cattails. She would find Ralph and the others. Surely they were here somewhere. They would have shelter, at least a substitute for a house. She was acting like a fool. She should have expected the house to be gone; even if it hadn't been, it was no longer hers. She would have no right to enter it, if it were still standing.

Crossing the yard, she hesitated at the edge of the cattails. She imagined she could hear rats squeaking somewhere in the tangle ahead. Finally she picked up a heavy stick, took a deep breath and stepped into the narrow path which twisted through the cattail marsh.

She had thought the marsh covered only a small area; now she became appalled at its size. The path twisted on and on, like some kind of maze laid out to confuse the unwary. Every few yards her feet got wet. At length she had to stop and sit down. There were squeaks and twitterings around her. The eternal sea gulls flapped overhead. Smoke drifted sluggishly skyward. She arose and went on.

Noon found her sitting at the base of a great mound of ashes and trash. The sea gulls still squawked and the sun glared down. The cattail marsh lay far away. She was tired, confused

and fearful. The dump area seemed enormous and she had not met a single human being. She had believed, previously, that the dump was mostly a level plateau; now she found to her dismay that it actually consisted of a great many mounds, gullies, ridges and pits. Unless she climbed to the top of a mound, she could not see very far. And even then she could not see down into distant holes and depressions.

She had called out until her voice broke. Now she sat silently. A huge grey-brown rat scurried into sight. Her hand tightened on the stick which she carried. The rat pretended it was nibbling on a paper shred but she knew it was watching her. It did not dart away.

She had a sudden horrible thought of night closing in, of rats by the dozen, by the hundreds, watching her, waiting . . .

She arose so abruptly the rat took alarm and disappeared. She would have to get out, she told herself. She would return to the marsh, take the little path and go back to the highway. Once there, she would be relatively safe.

But she soon found that she was hopelessly lost. The cattail marsh had vanished. She trudged on with growing apprehension, encountering bigger mounds and deeper gullies. The blazing sun seemed reflected back from every inch of the scorched sour earth. Her head began to ache; she developed a raging, tormenting thirst.

Rats watched her warily. Once a sea gull swung down, surveyed her with its cruel eyes and flapped off silently.

Finally her legs simply gave out. She collapsed weeping. Ralph had gone; they had all gone. She was now convinced that she was alone in the dump. Surely, by now, someone would have seen her, heard her. They had all left; perhaps the State had driven them out.

Shadows were beginning to slant across the gullies by the

time she got up. She was dry-eyed, but her legs ached, her eyes smarted and her throat was so parched she could scarcely swallow. When she tried to call out, her voice was only a whisper. Her first terror had passed. Now she felt a kind of calm despair.

Rounding a huge bank of calcified waste, she stopped, frozen. She was feverish, she concluded, dying maybe, for there scant yards away was a group of people, a shack of some sort, a cleared area which was like a little island of orderliness in an ocean of congealed chaos. She stared, unbelieving.

Someone saw her, exclaimed, and the whole group turned to stare at her.

"Lucy!"

It was Ralph. He broke from the group, bolted toward her. "Lucy! Lucy! How did you— What on earth—" She was in his arms then and he was laughing and she was crying. She was too exhausted and too thirsty to talk. She simply fell into his arms and he carried her toward the shack. The others crowded around, murmuring sympathetically.

Ralph settled her into a big broken-down armchair under the tin roof. Someone else held out a dipper of cool water, the sweetest water she had ever tasted in her life. Mrs. Morgee appeared with a wet cloth and began bathing her forehead and face. Someone took off her shoes.

In a few minutes she felt so much better, she sat up and looked around at them. Ralph hovered at her side, grinning idiotically. The rest of them only smiled at her, understanding that she did not yet wish to answer questions.

As darkness closed in, someone lit a fire. In a few minutes the aroma of mulligan stew spiced the air. Lucy's mouth watered; she was ravenous, she now realized.

After she had finished a huge bowl of stew, she could scarcely

keep her eyes open. Mrs. Morgee led her inside to a cot, helped her undress and got her into bed. Ralph remained outside with the others, around the fire. Explanations could wait until morning.

She had the sensation of melting without effort into a deep, dreamless sleep. She had made up her mind. She would never return to the plastic prefab, the trugrass lawn, the simulated maple tree and the food capsules. She wouldn't be carried away, all alone some morning, in a plastic bag.

She'd never get used to the rats and she didn't like the smoke and the sea gulls, but now she knew there were worse things.

At least she felt alive.

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